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ISSUES OF CLASS AND CULTURE: AN INTERVIEW WITH AIJAZ AHMAD

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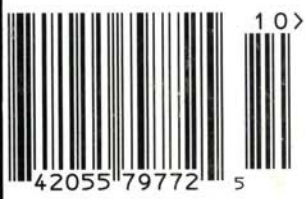
5

THUROW ON SOCIAL SECURITY: THE "LEFT" STRIKES AGAIN

Richard B. Du Boff

U.S. RACE RELATIONS AT THE CROSSROADS IN CALIFORNIA

Anthony M. Platt



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NOTES FROM THE EDITORS

We concluded our Notes in last month's *Monthly Review* with a number of questions, promising to return to them in this month's issue. To refresh your memory, here are the main questions: What happened to the conditions that made possible the golden decades (the 1950s and 60s) of cohabitation between capitalism and social democracy? Why did they break down? Are they likely to return in the foreseeable future? If not, what chance is there that the European left will be able to enjoy the luxury of cohabitation with capitalism, whether regulated or unregulated?

The first thing that has to be said, and kept firmly in mind, is that the 1950s and 60s were about as far from being typical of the history of capitalism as one can easily imagine. They came immediately after the Second World War which itself interrupted and put an end to capitalism's deepest depression. Theses events had an enormous impact on both capital and labor, the two dynamic forces that in their interaction largely shape and determine the course of capitalism's history.

Continued on inside back cover

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THUROW ON SOCIAL SECURITY: THE "LEFT" STRIKES AGAIN

by RICHARD B. Du BOFF

Lester Thurow belongs to a minority group among U.S. economists—those who are even moderately left of center on the political spectrum. He often raises hackles among mainstream economists by writing books with broad, socially relevant themes that expose the narrowness of their research. In *The Future of Capitalism. How Today's Economic Forces Shape Tomorrow's World* (1996), Thurow contends that "the world's economic topography" has been altered by a shifting of "five economic tectonic plates"—the end of communism, the global economy, the new "brainpower" technologies, "a multipolar world" with no dominant power, and the demography of "growing, moving, getting older."

These themes seem unexceptional, until one encounters the last, especially its "getting older" segment. At once what happened is evident: Thurow added a fifth "tectonic plate" because he must have realized that he had to address the controversies swirling about the "welfare state" in capitalist nations since the 1970s. Hastily, and opportunistically, he reached out for the most common currency—the right-wing argument that the welfare state has caused government spending to spiral out of control and that a major culprit in the

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United States is Social Security. In Chapter five of *The Future of Capitalism*, this argument is rehashed. Portions of it were reprinted in the Sunday *New York Times Magazine*, May 19, 1996, "The Birth of a Revolutionary Class," which could prove more damaging to progressive economic policies than any other popular article published so far in the 1990s. Diatribes against Social Security are commonplace, but this one comes from a prominent liberal, an editorial contributor to *Dollars & Sense* and *The American Prospect*, and a founding scholar of The Economic Policy Institute in Washington. We can now expect to see Thurow's *New York Times* article cited regularly in campaigns to gut Social Security.

Thurow paints a lurid picture of "a large group of affluent, economically inactive, elderly voters" who are "bringing down the social welfare state, destroying government finances, altering the distribution of purchasing power and threatening the investments that all societies need to make to have a successful future." In blaming the elderly for this catalog of economic troubles, Thurow builds his case on inflammatory rhetoric and misuse of statistics, as this sentence further demonstrates:

> Adjusting for things like household size, taxes and noncash benefits like health insurance and school lunches, the elderly have a median per capita income of a whopping 67 percent above that of the population as a whole.

In his book (p. 98), Thurow supports this claim by citing U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Income, Poverty, and Valuation of Noncash Benefits: 1993*, Table 10 (D15)—which includes, as income, "imputed return on equity in owned homes" and "medical programs." While noncash benefits like these are included in a definition of "income" which is useful for some purposes, they vastly overstate the economic well-being of senior citizens. For nonwealthy elderly who occupy homes worth more than they paid for them, there is no easy way to convert these paper gains into higher incomes. Medicare and Medicaid do not increase spendable income, but do for the elderly what should be done for everyone in any decent and rational society. Removing "im-

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puted return" and "medical programs" from Thurow's figures cuts his 67 percent difference by more than half.

But Thurow's figures, no matter how adjusted, are irrelevant. They cover all households having any members sixty-five years of age or older, with many of these households also containing younger people who have higher incomes than most independently-housed elderly. In the Census Bureau publication Thurow cites, Table 1 shows that for households headed by a householder (in whose name the home is owned or rented) under sixty-five years of age, median money income in 1993 was $35,957, while for households actually headed by someone sixty-five or older, it was $17,751, including Social Security benefits. ("Median" income is the mid-point of the whole distribution: half of all income receivers get more, half get less. It is a better measure of economic status because, unlike a "mean" or an average, it is not affected by extreme values.) By these figures, per capita money incomes of the elderly appear to be about 7 percent higher than for the rest of the population—which includes fifteen to twenty-three year-old householders with median incomes half those of householders twenty-four to sixty-four years of age. Take out Social Security and the incomes of two-thirds of the elderly would drop 40 percent or more; a third of the elderly would lose 65 percent of their incomes or more (*Social Security Bulletin,* Summer 1995, p. 28).

When Thurow deals with wealth (or assets), he is equally unreliable: "Those 65 to 74 have an average net worth of $222,000 versus $66,000 for those 35 to 44." His source is an article by Edward Wolff in *American Economic Review,* May 1992. Thurow fails to inform his readers that Wolff's data are for 1983, that Wolff never makes the age-group comparison or presents the figures that Thurow does (and leaves unexplained), and that in 1983 average net worth peaked for age group sixty-five to sixty-nine (at $339,000 per household, including homes) and dropped by 40 percent for those aged seventy to seventy-four, putting that group well below net worth for the entire forty-five to sixty-four-age group. In *Top Heavy. A Study of the Increasing Inequality of Wealth in America* (1995, pp. 16-17), Wolff reports that for 1962 to 1989, the only households that

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increased their share of total assets were those in the forty-five to sixty-nine year-old category. Although they were wealthier than those below forty-five years of age, the seventy and over group lost the most ground of all.

Well, Thurow might reply, even if the elderly are not so "affluent" after all, they are "one-issue voters who exercise a disproportionate impact on the political process." The result is that "today, spending on entitlements plus interest payments on the national debt (most of it accumulated in recent years to make payments to the elderly) take 60 percent of total tax revenue."

To begin with, comparing "spending on entitlements" alone with "total tax revenue" is an arithmetic trick that inflates the share of entitlements in the federal budget, because tax receipts are continually running lower than spending. For example, if total revenues are 100, total spending 125, and entitlements 20, the latter are 20 percent of revenues. But they are 16 percent of outlays, with which they should be compared in the company of other major budget outlays. In addition, Thurow's statement lumps all entitlements together as one huge problem, never distinguishing among them. Thurow is in fine company here: former Nixon Secretary of Commerce, Wall Street banker, and self-styled "Republican fat cat" Peter Peterson and his Concord Coalition partners are making careers out of this kind of Social Security bashing. The following figures, from *The Budget of the United States Government*, provide the information that serious students of these issues need.

	1975	1985	1995
Total Federal Outlays (billions)	$332.3	$946.4	$1,519.1
Percent of Outlays: Major program groups			
Social Security	19.5%	19.9%	21.9%
Medicare and Medicaid	5.9	9.3	16.2
Means-Tested (except Medicaid)	5.6	4.6	6.1
Military and International	28.2	28.4	19.3
Net Interest	7.0	13.7	15.3
All other	33.8	24.1	21.2

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The largest entitlements are Social Security, Medicare (which covers the elderly and the disabled), and Medicaid (the state-federal health program for the poor). Together they account for 38 percent of federal outlays, and about 70 percent of all entitlements. The next largest are Civil Service and military retirement and disability, and unemployment compensation (totalling 12 percent of entitlements and included in "All other," p.4), followed by means-tested programs (largely food stamps and Supplemental Security Income). While Social Security, which includes disability benefits, is increasing somewhat faster than total outlays, the only entitlements growing very rapidly are Medicare and Medicaid. On that subject, few words suffice: Thurow seems to believe that a health care system which is the costliest of that of any high-income nation (14 percent of gross domestic product) yet excludes nearly 20 percent of its people can be cured by cutting benefits for the elderly, rather than replacing the entire system.

The figures on p. 4 also belie Thurow's comment that the national debt has been forced up "to make payments to the elderly." In one swoop Thurow rewrites fiscal history to shift blame for the deficits of the past fifteen years from Reaganomics to the elderly. Those deficits are mainly the result of the 1981-1983 tax cuts, only partially reversed by the tax increases of 1990 and 1993. On the expenditure side of the ledger, only the rising cost of health care and larger interest payments are contributing to the ongoing budget deficits. The doubling of the interest share of outlays since 1975 (p. 4) came not only from the deficit-driven increase in the national debt, but also from the historically high interest rates imposed by the Federal Reserve to "fight inflation." Higher interest rates also bring slower economic growth and higher unemployment, and in turn lower tax revenues, widening budget deficits, and a bigger interest bill yet. That Thurow can overlook this vicious circle is a tribute to the slipshod character of his article and the book from which it is drawn: elsewhere in *The Future of Capitalism* (ch. 9), Thurow assails the "war on inflation" waged by Federal Reserve chair Alan

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Greenspan and his fellow central bankers and the "real human havoc" it has wrought.

If Social Security spending is growing any faster than total outlays, the increases in the taxes that support it more than make up for rising benefits being paid to retirees. In 1995, Social Security payroll tax receipts were $399 billion, while Social Security benefits amounted to $339 billion, meaning that the system ran a surplus of $60 billion. Without it, the 1995 federal deficit would have been $224 billion instead of $164 billion.

Here Thurow makes a bad case worse: "advocates for the elderly argue that Social Security is running a surplus and, hence, needs no restructuring. But that is an illusion. If the Government is running an overall deficit, it is irrelevant if one sector has a 'surplus' because it is credited with collecting more taxes than it needs. What matters is what is driving the expenditure side of the budget." This is an amateurish evasion: if Social Security is in surplus, there is no way it could add to the deficit except to allow *non-Social Security expenditures* to be larger than otherwise. It is also a bizarre application of public finance. Apparently Thurow would cut Social Security benefits while leaving intact the structure of payroll taxes, which are specifically and legally dedicated to Social Security.

To this, Thurow delivers the standard response: Social Security's surplus will disappear once the "baby boomers" start retiring in 2012, so that "the current 15 percent Social Security tax rate would have to be boosted to 40 percent by 2029 to provide the benefits that have been promised." His source is purely second-hand—an article in *Fortune* (November 14, 1994). The author, Ann Dowd, predicts the demise of Social Security by referring to economist Laurence Kotlikoff's "generational accounting," which purports to measure the costs of government borne by each generation of people over their entire lifetimes, with Social Security supposedly responsible for imposing a crushing tax burden on generations born after 1980. Thurow seems unaware that the estimations required for such calculations are extraordinarily complex, often arbitrary, and can produce results that vary enormously

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from one economist to the next (see Dean Baker, *Robbing the Cradle?* Economic Policy Institute, 1995).

Thurow completely overlooks the more widely accepted way of estimating the future costs of Social Security. The *1996 Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of the Federal Old-Age and Survivors Insurance and Disability Insurance Trust Funds* forecasts that by its "best estimate of the future course of the population and the economy," the Social Security deficit (benefits exceeding tax collections) in 2030 will be 4 percent of the nation's taxable payroll (p. 108). This is the amount by which the payroll tax rate would have to be raised to establish "actuarial balance" for the next thirty-four years; the present tax rate of 12.4 percent (half on employees, half on employers) would increase to 16.4 percent now or in stages over the years. (Thurow's "current 15 percent" rate is wrong: it includes payroll taxes for Medicare.) In fact, the Trustees' "best estimate" is based on the assumption that over the next thirty-four years the economy, and its taxpaying capacity, will grow at a rate of 1.8 percent per year—more slowly than in any other thirty to forty-year period in U.S. history and well below the historical trend of 3 percent per year. If the economy grows at the sluggish rate experienced during the past two decades, 2.5 percent per year, actuarial balance could be achieved by 2030 with a tax increase of only 1.3 percent of taxable payroll.

Even a 4 percentage-point increase in taxes hardly seems onerous in a rich country which has the smallest share of its gross domestic product going to taxes of any high-income nation (less than 32 percent). Nor would it be necessary to raise the tax rate for all workers. Actuarial balance might be achieved by removing the income ceiling on the payroll tax ($62,700 in 1996) and levying it on all incomes without upper limit. This solution certainly seems desirable in light of recent history: "No country not experiencing a revolution or a military defeat with a subsequent occupation has probably ever had as rapid or as widespread an increase in [income] inequality as has occurred in the United States in the past two decades" (*The Future of Capitalism*, p. 42).

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To borrow a term from Thurow, the "disconnect" between his eloquent writing on economic inequalities and his mindless assault on Social Security and the elderly who rely on it is gaping. Another example: "No public interest is served by making parents rich at the cost of making children poor." Thurow thus joins the ranks of those who blame Social Security for child poverty. In other words, the highest child poverty rate of all high-income nations by far (more than a fifth of all children living in poverty) is caused by Social Security benefits which are more modest than those of other high-income nations.

The disconnect is no less impressive for military spending. Unlike "expenditures on the elderly," Thurow states, military spending is not "squeezing government investments in infrastructure, education and research and development," because it is "down to less than 4 percent of gross domestic product, and even if America were willing to take defense spending down to zero, the day of reckoning would be postponed by only a few years." There will be no "day of reckoning" for Social Security unless politicians, helped by articles like Thurow's, act to dismantle it instead of taking the modest steps needed to preserve it. Furthermore, while the military's share of the federal budget has declined since the 1980s, its current level of $265 billion per year is at least three times as much as Russia spends, and twice as much as Britain, France, Germany, and Japan combined. That sum would appear to "squeeze" a wide range of desperately needed social outlays—especially since "there is no credible military threat to the United States that even the American military can imagine when justifying their budgets" (*The Future of Capitalism*, p. 64).

For all of Thurow's contributions to left-of-center publications and organizations, his moorings have never been firm. He is an example of what Paul Baran called "the intellect worker, whose work and thought is the particular job in hand," even if that job is more ambitious than most others ever take on. The intellect worker makes no attempt to "interconnect" with the historical process but "questions the prevailing state

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of affairs . . . within the framework of capitalist institutions" (*The Longer View*, 1969, pp. 5-8). In the United States, the corporate business counterattack against "big government" is now two decades old, but for Thurow the only problem raised by American corporations is how to make them "world class" competitors in the global economy. The only political force he recognizes is the elderly, and the only class war being waged is the war of the old against the young.

Publication of Thurow's attack on Social Security in *The New York Times* is no accident. On August 27, 1995, the Sunday *Times Magazine* published a broadside similar to Thurow's in content and tone, by staff writer Elizabeth Kolbert—"Who Will Face the Music?" of the "nearly broke Social Security system." Nine months later it solicited Thurow's article, which was not originally written for it. Going back to the 1980s the nation's flagship newspaper has published a nearly unbroken string of hostile, and bitter, articles on Social Security by an array of writers and columnists, "new Democrats" as well as right-wingers. Now they are joined by Lester Thurow, who has bestowed upon the neoconservative right a priceless gift—support, from a man widely associated with the American left, for its campaign to destroy the greatest single accomplishment of American social legislation.

If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did, and it never will.... If we ever get free from all the oppressions and wrongs heaped upon us, we must pay for their removal. We must do this by labor, by suffering, by sacrifice, and, if needs be, by our lives, and the lives of others.

—Frederick Douglass

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ISSUES OF CLASS AND CULTURE: AN INTERVIEW WITH AIJAZ AHMAD

conducted by ELLEN MEIKSINS WOOD

Question: In your book *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* you observe that American literary theory in the last two decades has been remarkably devoid of influences from the major work in Marxist political economy that has been done in the United States, not least by *Monthly Review* and its publishing house. Why is this significant? Why does literary theory need Marxist political economy?

Ahmad: The latter part of your question can be answered more briefly. Culture is not reducible to those processes that Marxist political economy studies for its own purposes, but culture *is* embedded in those processes. The so-called "mass culture" today is quite inseparable from processes of mass production, marketing, profiteering, systems of mass communication, etc. Every social practice and all material production involves signification, but neither

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In the 1995 summer issue we published a provocative interview with the distinguished and controversial Marxist cultural theorist, Aijaz Ahmad, originally conducted by a Slovenian journal, with some modifications for *Monthly Review*. In that interview, Ahmad answered a wide range of questions on culture and cultural theory, nationalism, the "politics of identity," and the political role of intellectuals. Here we are printing a supplementary interview, conducted by Ellen Meiksins Wood specifically for *Monthly Review*, which allows Ahmad to pursue some of his ideas in directions that will be of special interest to our readers, dealing with questions about political economy, globalization, class, multiculturalism, and the socialist project of emancipation.

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communication nor fashion nor any other of those things that Cultural Studies takes as its specific object of study is merely or even mainly a signifying practice. Nor can the relation between cultural production and its basis in economic and political processes be read off anecdotally or epiphenominally; it has to be studied rigorously and structurally. You can't just throw in a bit of economics here, a bit of technology there; you have to be able to locate individual facts in a complex historical process, and for that you need very considerable theoretical preparedness. In its beginnings Cultural Studies was quite aware of all this, and some have sought to remain true to those very prosaic origins. In the main, though, Cultural Studies has itself become one of those many styles of consumer capitalism that it sets out to study.

But my reference to *Monthly Review* that you have recalled meant a great deal more than that. Implied in it was my own sense of the overall structure of the output—in the journal and from the press—that one associates with *Monthly Review.* It seems to me that in the postwar United States *Monthly Review* has been the only institution of the Left which provides a full-fledged narrative of the world, for the very period in which this institution has functioned. One doesn't have to agree with all aspects of this narrative, but what I want to emphasize is that there is a narrative of the world more comprehensive than any that has come from any other source in the Anglophone world, and this narrative includes, equally the structures of advanced capitalism as well as the attempts to overthrow it or at least transform it. In scope, this output has been less occupied with Western Europe and Japan, and the latter I think is a special lacuna; but this narrative includes comprehensive histories of people's struggles—specifically revolutionary struggles—a matter that stands in sharp contrast to the output of the *New Left Review* and its press, the only institution of the Left over the past three decades, albeit outside the United States, that may be compared with *Monthly Review* either in ambition or in achievement. It is interesting to me that *Monthly Review* has been relatively less concerned

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with Western Europe, which has been *New Left Review's* special provenance.

This narrative has some specific features. One is that although it broke with what became of the Soviet state with Stalin and thereafter, it did not become hostile to the myriad Communist movements as such, be they in Cuba, Vietnam, Angola, India, or anywhere else, not to speak of the many revolutionary movements which were not formally communist but were of that kind of inspiration. The criterion of solidarity was not that a movement be Stalinist or Trotskyist or Maoist or Guevarrist or whatever, but that it be revolutionary in a sense that would be recognizably so from a Marxist perspective. I don't mean that I agree with every judgment *Monthly Review* made based on this principle (its treatment of the Chinese Cultural Revolution is a case in point) but I do greatly support the principle. This remarkable combination of nonsectarianism and profound respect for the revolutionary enterprise gave to the principal tendency of *Monthly Review* also a remarkable resilience against the two great temptations of our time: social democratic degeneration on the one hand, romance of the national bourgeoisies on the other— and this without devaluing either the importance of whatever reform the working people might be able to win or the importance of anti-imperialist nationalism in the imperialized world. I might add that the editors of *Monthly Review* have had an exemplary commitment to a certain level of linguistic communication that is necessary for socialist activism. I think that in these times of professionalised jargons on the Left it needs to be said that those "Review of the Month" essays in which Sweezy and Magdoff have over the years given us such lucid analyses of intricate details of high capitalist finance are gems of English prose. That prose should be compulsory reading for Derrideans.

I remember teaching Braverman's great book to undergraduates who had no background in economics and communicating to them something essential, something concrete about what has happened to the American working class in this century. I think a profound sensitivity to work of that kind

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would yield us a very different sense of what gets called "mass culture" in today's Cultural Studies. As I look back on that stream of books that came out of the Monthly Review Press about revolutionary struggles in a host of imperialized countries—Cuba, Vietnam, Guinea-Bissau, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, China, Egypt, and many others—I am firmly convinced that anyone who had seriously attended to the lessons of that documentation could never so easily downgrade the whole question of revolutionary class struggle in favor of "national allegory," "hybridity," "postcoloniality" or whatever else happens to be the fashion of the day. *Monthly Review* is of course not the only source for knowledge of that kind, but in the United States it has been the largest such source and comparatively the most reliable. So, I find it quite reprehensible that American leftists who want to do radical work in areas of culture and ideology, and who constantly make large statements about the politics of the modern world, especially "Third World," have been so little engaged with the body of theory and information made available by this institution.

Since you have referred to my book I might add that I have of course not written a book in the *Monthly Review* tradition but some key sections of the book would be better understood in the United States if radicals in that country were better acquainted with this archive in their own national tradition. It interests me that my critics never engage with the two chapters, the introduction and the concluding chapter, which I take to be crucial in the very deliberate design of the book; they only go after the famous names—Said, Jameson, Rushdie—of the middle chapters. Now, the narrative of the postwar world that I provide there is of course not the narrative one would get from *Monthly Review*, but anyone familiar with the *Monthly Review* narrative would be well equipped to make sense of the narrative I have assembled in summary. I think that readers who pay little attention to the actual struggles of the people around the world over the past fifty years or more but who know their Benedict Anderson and their Gellner and their Subalternists are very ill-equipped to understand my approach toward nationalism. For example, I view

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the question of nationalism *historically.* Consequently I may oppose many, many kinds of nationalism, but I also hold on to the importance of anti-imperialist nationalism in a world dominated by imperialism. Similarly, a good number of people can't quite figure out what kind of Marxist I am; they seem to have some very fixed categories in their head—Stalinist, Trotskyist, Eurocommunist, Maoist, what have you—and I don't fit any of those categories. This, then, is made worse by the fact that I write comprehensible prose, which probably means that I couldn't possibly be doing theoretical work; some people have actually declared that I am anti-theory. If U.S. radicals knew more about the *Monthly Review* tradition they would immediately see that I have *not* written a book in that tradition but they would also have a way of handling some of the things in the book that confuse them.

Q: "Multiculturalism" is a major theme in U.S. intellectual life. Does this strike you as a useful concept? Does it denote a coherent educational or political project?

Ahmad: I believe that the logic of capital is to destroy the integrity of all use values and to impose exchange value upon all productions of value. Which then means that the cultural logic of capitalism is to produce a uniform culture of pure consumption, pure commodity fetishism. I don't mean that the actual, historically constituted cultures of capitalist societies are like that. Capital is never able to resolve the contradictions that it produces. But I do think that the *logical* tendency of capital is toward subsumption of all cultural value under commodity fetishism. I also speak and write constantly about absolutely necessary tensions between universality and particularity which cannot be resolved. Such tensions can only be lived, and the hope is that they shall be lived not destructively but in a productive relation. But I am under no illusion that this tension can ever be resolved or even need be resolved in any final sense, because both are intrinsic to human social life. With this kind of belief, no one could possibly be against the idea of the multiplicity of cultures or the need to devise educational and political agendas that recognize such multiplicities.

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So one can't be against "multiculturalism" as such. But one can legitimately question, not just from the Right but also authentically from the Left, the way this concept has come into play in the United States. Chronologically, I think, this particular idea of "multiculturalism" has come *after* and in some covert way *against* the black insurgency and the women's liberation movement, and of course *after* the incipient and eventually unrealized anti-imperialist potentials of the anti-war movement. It serves to defuse and even derail the idea that empire and gender and race are *central* to the structure of differences in U.S. society in a way that differences among, say, the Italian, Jewish, and Polish ethnic groups are not. It denies, in other words, the idea that there is a hierarchy of determination in existing social relations which is an inevitable result of historical formation quite beyond any valuation that any individual may attach to them. It tends to push down in the scale of one's priorities the idea that given the specific history of the United States, given the social structure bequeathed by slavery, the position of African-Americans is *unique* and cannot be collapsed into generalities of ethnicities, difference, and "multiculturalism." In other words, this kind of relativism tends toward the obliteration of actual, historically given relations of power in favor of a levelled out notion of multiplicity and difference in which everyone becomes, sooner or later, everyone else's "other" and, by the same token, a member of a minority and even of a "subaltern" group. Such definitions tend to privilege the idea of culture as signifying system over the idea of culture's embeddedness in material life. They tend to assert discreteness of cultures within a national space, and to privilege ethnicity in the constitution of each culture. A Jewish peddler on New York's Lower East Side then came to have something more fundamentally in common with a Jewish magnate on Wall Street than all the peddlers from different ethnic groups could ever share.

At one end of this ideology, we have the abrogation of any normative sense of cultural value whereby judgments of right and wrong can be made; each culture, as discrete eth-

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nicity, is said to have its own structure of identity formation. At the other end, the ideology of multiculturalism tries to reconstruct, on campuses that have seen intense confrontations on the issue of fatally unequal distributions of power, a celebratory version of U.S. pluralism whereby there is always enough in the basket to go around for everyone and all differences can be accommodated in a non-antagonistic fashion. So in the process of being granted their autonomous spaces, differences are also trivialised. In the actual syllabus formation, this kind of relativism and pluralism typically leads to either a very hardened version of discrete identities, whereby entire courses can be structured around distinct identities, or to sheer randomness in which today's text may illustrate one identity and tomorrow's another, and so on. This kind of multiculturalism in the U.S. college system has had the effect of greatly diluting the original purpose of cultural studies.

Q: In your recent article on the literature of "post-coloniality," you make some provocative suggestions about the current historical conjuncture, arguing that, while there has certainly been an increasing "globalization" of capital, there has, contrary to conventional wisdom, also been "an intensification of the nation-state form." Could you elaborate a bit on this and on the contradictory effects which, you argue, this combination is having on the realms of culture and ideology?

Ahmad: I don't want to repeat what I have said in that article on this issue. So, let me simply give the full reference; it was published in the London-based journal *Race and Class*, in the January-March issue 1995.

The word "globalization" is, I think, a highly ideological word, and as such actually refers to quite a few different things. At one level, it simply means that with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the system of the states it represented there is now only one system, that of imperialist capital, and everyone better accept this fact. Those who celebrate "globalization" don't put it so brutally, but that's what they mean. Second, the term refers to tremendous mobility of capital and com-

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modities, the increased role of export/import trade in national accounts, the power of communication and transport technologies with unparalleled global reach, the enormous power of finance capital and speculation over and above industrial capital across national frontiers, the ability of new and centrally-produced cultural commodities to bypass national apparatuses of education and information through telecasting and information highways, the rise of production and management systems in which the production process itself can be fragmented and located in different countries and/or quickly moved from one to the other, and so on. Third, the term"globalisation" is also a euphemism for the fact that a handful of imperialist institutional arrangements—the World Bank, IMF, GATT etc.—are now determining national policies across the so-called Third World. Fourth, it refers to the rapid penetration of all production by capitalism, hence by the world market. The World Bank calculated that by the end of the century only twelve per cent of the economic production in the world will be outside the global capitalist market as such.

At the macro-economic level, there are powerful tendencies and I do not wish to understate their importance. In some ways none of this is very surprising. Capital has had a tendency toward transnationalisation since its very inception, as not only Marx but also Luxemberg and Lenin knew very well. This is part of the story of colonialism, for example. Lenin's definition of imperialism would mean nothing without this historical tendency. What I am saying is something else. The first point is that there is another, equally powerful historical tendency, the one toward a far greater mobility of capital and relative *immobility* of labor, which still holds. One feature of this other tendency is that while capital seeks to travel across national frontiers, regimes of labor still continue to be national regimes. There is a pretence in most kinds of economics that prices are determined—perhaps brutally but "freely"—in the market. This simply is not so. Prices, especially the prices of labor, are determined *historically*, and

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the nationally constituted disciplines and regimes of labor are a fundamental component to that history.

Even in the most advanced capitalist countries, the nation-state is alive and well. Japanese capital is both transnational and aggressively Japanese. Germany has achieved its expanded national unification only recently, and one would have to be a fool not to see that there is a relationship between the German national interest and the Bundesbank. I also read somewhere that something like 95 percent of U.S. savings are invested inside the country. I might add that mutual accommodation of national interests is much more possible among the most advanced capitalist countries and one may speak with relatively greater justice of a market of "free" exchanges among them. But as soon as you look at the "globalization" that connects the imperialist countries with the imperialized ones, you become much more aware of national differentiations and coercions.

Which brings me to the question of colonialism and the so-called "postcolonialism." I mean, first of all, the hard materialities of it. How does U.S. capital arrive in Bangalore today, in the context of a sovereign Indian state, to exploit the cheaper labor and industrial plant there, including even intellectual labor? Is there a colonial empire to make free entry possible, as it was possible for British capital to come to India during the Raj? Or is there just an open global market for capital to travel on its own volition? Not at all. That capital must pass through the Indian nation-state, must rely on certain disciplines of labor, wage contracts, conditions of industrial peace, chances of repatriation of profits that only the Indian state can guarantee. The nation-state in this case is the articulating principle between global capital and national labor.

From whose point of view do you then read history? From the standpoint of capital that circulates globally, or from that of labor which is everywhere in chains? I think the metropolitan intellectuals who are such enthusiasts of globalization should organize a movement for the abolition of passports, so that we may actually have movements of labor

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almost as free as the movements of capital itself. Let all the U.S. capital come to India and all the Indian workers go to the U.S. to earn U.S. wages. Let there be a global equalization of wages and profits. Here I am not asking for socialism, only that the bourgeoisie be true to its word: free movements of people. The struggle for socialism shall be I think easier in a world turned so upside down.

What does it mean for "realms of culture and ideology?" It depends on what sites of cultural and ideological production you have in mind. I think that the intellectuals in the metropolitan countries who speak of a "world culture," without foregrounding the fact that a "world culture" in this circumstance can only be the predominance of imperialist culture, are paving a way to hell with good intentions. As I look at this process from inside India, what I find is a powerful affirmation of the good old Marxist idea that economics and culture go hand in hand. In fact, the contemporary evidence is that one *experiences* the shifts in the realm of culture even before those shifts take hold fully in the economic realm. The Indian government, politically bankrupt to its core, has now had the policy of "globalization" and "liberalization" in the current sense for barely five years or so. During this time, very little Western investment capital has actually come in because they want even more favorable conditions. But the flooding of India with western cultural artifacts, from entertainment grids to consumption goods to ideologies of consumption, has been much more far-reaching.

In these circumstances, one is struck by two parallel developments in the ideological realm of what gets called "cultural studies." There is the idea of the *discreteness* of identities, cultural, ethnic, or national; a kind of remorseless differentialism, whereby I am not permitted the claim that I may *understand* your identity but I am supposed to simply *respect* whatever you say are the requirements of your identity. In this ideology, any number of people celebrate hardened boundaries between self and other, denounce what they understand as the "universalism" of the Enlightenment, rationalism, and so on, while also fully participating in the

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globalization of consumption patterns and the packaging of identities as so many exhibits. At the same time and often from the same people, we also have the propagation of the idea of infinite hybridity, migrancy, choice of alternate or multiple identities, as if new selves could be fashioned in the instant out of any clay that one could lay one's hands on, and as if cultures had no real historical density and identities could be simply *made up*, sui generis, out of the global traffic and malleability of elements taken from all over the world.

Q: In the same article, you remark that "postcoloniality is also like most things a matter of class." This kind of emphasis on class is, of course, deeply unfashionable. Without dwelling on the notion of "postcoloniality" (if it isn't too frivolous to ask for an answer in such a limited space), would you care to justify the sweeping proposition that "most things" are a matter of class?

Ahmad: Let me first make explicit a rather memorable reference there. In her biography of Chu Teh, the great commander of the People's Army during the Revolution in China, Agnes Smedley recalls a moment when she had asked him about his having been a bandit and a thief in his youth. As Smedley tells it, Chu Teh fell silent for a while and then said something like, "Theft, you know, is also a matter of class." I read that book when I was a very young boy but the truth of that simple statement has stayed with me all these years, and in paraphrasing those words I just wanted to record my admiration for both Smedley and Chu Teh.

But you have asked me to *justify* those words. I'm not sure how one justifies words so obviously true. India is said to have a population between 900 and 1,000 million. Roughly half of them are illiterate; but no bourgeois is illiterate anywhere in the world and those who constantly speak of "the pleasure of the text" are never poor. Roughly half of the world's blind people live in India; but blindness too is a matter of class, in the sense that blindness is overwhelmingly a disease of the poor and in the sense that such high incidence of blindness has a lot to do with living in conditions that produce blindness, with number and quality of hospitals, with the

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ability to pay for cure and care. What needs to justify itself is that other kind of blindness, which refuses to see that most things *are* a matter of class. That refusal is itself very intimately a matter of class.

The real question, then, is: why does one need to reiterate a truth so obvious? I think that the institutionalizing of certain kinds of radicalism has gone hand in hand with a certain sanitization of vocabulary, which is ultimately quite devastating for thought itself. One begins with the idea that there is some economic determination in social life but also that, as Althusser famously put it, "the lonely hour" of that final determination "never comes." In the next step, one forgoes the idea of economic determination altogether. Then, the critique of capitalism is sundered from any forthright affirmation of what might replace it. So, the more anti-bourgeois, and anti-colonial etc. one becomes, the less one talks about socialism as a determinate horizon. In the process, critiques of capitalism are also sundered from any necessity of working class politics. Indeed, one may use the word "bourgeois," in a cultural sort of sense, but the word "proletariat" makes one distinctly uncomfortable, as if using such words is some kind of anti-social activity. One may speak of any number of disorientations and even oppressions but one cultivates all kinds of politeness and indirection about the structure of capitalist class relations in which those oppressions are embedded. To speak of any of that directly and simply is to be "vulgar." In this climate of Aesopian languages it is absolutely essential to reiterate that most things *are* a matter of class. That kind of statement is I think surprising only in a culture like that of the North American university in which radicalism has not had a powerful connection with movements of the working class in a long time. But it is precisely in that kind of culture that people need to hear such obvious truths.

Q: You have made some very trenchant criticisms of contemporary literary and cultural writings by thinkers who are very influential on the intellectual left. These criticisms have generated a great deal of controversy. What aspects of

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your criticisms seem to have been most difficult for people to accept? Why? Have you been surprised by the reaction? Have people been missing the point? What do *you* regard as most important of your criticisms? Do you want to set the record straight in any way?

Ahmad: I can say quite truthfully—I don't mean I am necessarily right, but I do think—that no real controversy on my book has ever taken place. I said earlier that so far as I am concerned, the burden of the main argument is contained in the Introduction and the last chapter. To my knowledge, no one has engaged with those in print. The chapter that has had the most electrifying effect in literary circles in India, the one on Indian literature, has never been discussed in the West; most people who have commented on my book there simply don't know what I'm talking about. Most critics latch on to the three middle chapters, about individuals and largely about individual texts, but in ways that I find bewildering. I have said that Jameson is to my mind the most important living literary theorist in the English language today, from whom I have learned a great deal but I am writing critically about him because I reject the idea that *every* text from the Third World is to be read as a "national allegory" and the further idea that nationalism is the determinate answer to what Jameson calls "American postmodern culture." This very high praise for Jameson—(Is he really that much better than Eagleton?)—I am not inventing now, "to set the record straight"; it is there in the very essay I wrote in response to his essay. No one has yet refuted what I have actually said about "national allegory," etc; but it is alleged that what I have said amounts to "attack," "vilification," and so on— without any citation of any discourteous phrase I might have used about Jameson. The same sort of thing has happened about my criticism of Rushdie. I have been calling Khomeini a "clerical fascist" since the day he took power— when some of the more notable defenders of Rushdie were being very enthusiastic about the so-called revolutionary tradition of the Irani clergy and were concentrating only on the misrepresentation of Islam in the U.S. media— you only have to look at Edward Said's *Covering Islam* and the

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issue of *Race and Class* which covered the Irani Revolution at that time to see what I mean. But I am accused of waging a *jihad* against Rushdie, as someone has written in the prestigious U.S. journal, *Public Culture.*

So the matter boils down to the chapter on Edward Said. The last one-third of that chapter is a close scrutiny of two of Said's essays; I have never come across a single critic or reviewer who has engaged with that part of the chapter. Even about *Orientalism*, I think that the so-called "controversy" has never actually dealt with the main issues: Said's insistence on a remorseless continuity from Greek tragedy onwards; his uncertainty and even error in specifying the relationship between imperialism and the Eurocentric biases in modern European discourses about non-Europe; his privileging of written textuality in general and of literature in particular in this narrative of Europe's domination over non-European; his neglect of the fact that much more than the Arab East, it is India, China, and generally the far East that have been far more central in the system of knowledges that we can properly call "Orientalism"; his careless remarks about such key figures as Dante and Marx; his astonishing levelling of all kinds of European knowledges under the singular heading of Orientalism, whereas, for example, anyone who knows anything about India would find it scandalous that both William Jones and Macauley are so easily called "Orientalist," and so on. All kinds of historical specificities are sacrificed for the making of this construct called "Orientalism." I have never denied that in the Eurocentric atmosphere prevailing in the U.S. academy *Orientalism* has had quite considerable salutary effects, especially in areas of literary study and Middle Eastern Studies. I did not dwell on those positive aspects because they are well known. I thought, instead, that one should address some other aspects of that work which have indeed done very considerable harm. I must say that the substance of my argument, which I have illustrated here in the form of separate questions, was never answered. Looking back, I now think that there certainly were places where I mishandled the rhetoric, but it also interests me that verbal exaggerations of a negative

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kind were made the issue but the same people never mentioned that I had praised Said in the highest terms for his personal courage and the work he has done on the issue of Palestine. So the reading of the rhetoric was itself tendentious. If you discount short reviews, Michael Sprinker is the only one among the critics who have written at any length about my book who has in fact addressed any of the issues that were central to its argument.

Was I surprised? Very much. By the attention that the book got, and then even more by the will of the detractors to personalize the whole issue, as if the book were nothing more than a "vilification" of a couple of individuals. It has been very discouraging for me that people who write about the book normally don't engage with the more substantive chapters: the Introduction, the last chapter, what I have to say about Marx or India or about Indian Literature, most of the basic issues I raise about the authors whose fame preoccupies those who usually feel constrained to write about my book. My chapter on *Shame* opens with a discussion of the connection there might be between the way the issue of "migrancy" gets posed in Rushdie's kind of fiction, the circulation of multinational capital, and of the personnel thrown to the whirlwind by that circulation, in our time—between the cultural "hybridity" that is celebrated these days, the fragmented and polyglot surface of literary texts made familiar to us by such masterpieces of modernism as *The Waste Land*, and the patterns of consumption symbolized by the supermarket in an age of globalized circulation of commodities. It has been both a surprise and a regret for me that the kind of "cultural studies" we now have just doesn't engage with questions of that kind, not when it comes to a serious discussion of a novel written by somebody who now commands an iconic status in the West thanks to his conflict with "Islamic fundamentalism." I find this kind of self-righteousness very amusing, considering that my own tussle with Islamism started much earlier.

Q: Some kinds of "relativism"—cultural, even moral—used to seem progressive, in the sense that they resisted various claims to moral or cultural superiority which could be

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used to justify domination, oppression, imperialism, and so on. Today, the socialist left often finds itself defending "universalist" principles against new forms of particularism and relativism; and you, for example, have had some very strong things to say about poststructuralist and postmodernist particularisms, "identity" politics, extreme forms of "cultural differentialism," and so on. Can you offer any simple rules for negotiating the difficult transactions between "universalism" and "particularism?" Is there a way of granting recognition to human "difference" without giving up the kinds of universal principles that used to underlie the socialist project of a general *human* emancipation?

Ahmad: Let me first tell you something about my *experience* before going on to history and theory. I was born and bred in a society with a phenomenal range of diversities of all kinds. The Anthropological Survey of India tells us that there are today some three thousand distinct communities in India, something like 360 languages and dialects. It might also interest you that according to the same Survey sixty or so percent of the Indian people think of themselves as migrants, as having come from elsewhere in the country. Historians of Early Medieval India tell us that the people who do *not* believe in any grand religions—Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc.—have always been the majority in this country. Meanwhile, a sense of a sub-continental entity also begins early. I think it has something to do with geography, with being bounded by very tall mountains on one side and a vast ocean on the other, and with the massiveness of alluvial plains and the riverine systems. This sense of an entity is there even in the territorial expanse over which the stories of the *Mahabharatha* unfold. Some of it gets embedded in the Early and Medieval imperial consolidations. By the time of the devotional theisms of the medieval times a certain sensibility can be found among the popular classes across India, grounded in regional idioms but profoundly humanist and universalist. In the more recent centuries, the generalization of capitalist market, the national anti-colonial movements and then, since Independence, a system of representative government based on universal

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franchise, not to speak of modern travel, communication etc., has also produced a profound sense of a modern polity and a territorial nation.

In a nation so very heterogeneous, negotiations between universality and particularity, between migrancy and a sense of place, is daily experience; even the Constitution of India has to recognize twenty national languages against one in the United States or two in Canada. One has a profound sense of belonging to all of it yet the knowledge that one would not understand even a fraction of it, even in the simple sense of exchanging mutually intelligible words. So, when these same issues surface in such facile ways in the exhortations of "identity politics," as if these were grand discoveries of the postmodern, I don't quite understand—I understand cerebrally but I don't understand in the gut—what the fuss is all about.

I don't mean that everyone in India lives like that. All sorts of abominable things happen. I meant to say something about my own experience and the experience I share with other progressive people like myself, and there *are* millions of us, I don't know how many but a great many—and about the very textures of daily life that people share without having actually theorized about it. And what I meant to say was that in this life, and in the lives of countless people, generation after generation, there have been so many ways, traditional ways and modern ways, of reconciling "universalism" and "particularism" that there have been for me many quite concrete ways of negotiating my own experience. These ways are quite different from the way this question gets posed in societies like those of North America which have very brief histories and which carry such burdens of racial genocide, slavery and migration—societies that have relatively little that is older than a capitalist ethic and not much of a communist tradition.

In more impersonal terms of history and theory, I would again bring up the issue of *rights*, about which I write and speak constantly because I think it *is* important to come at it from different angles. I think that there is a terrible distortion in

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the way the history of "universalism" gets recounted in the polemics against the Enlightenment, post-Enlightenment etc. In such accounts, the discourse of rights remains where it began, namely in the proposition that the locus of all rights is the individual, that this individual has no attributes other than that of citizenship, that the structure of universal rights must follow the logic of universal laissez-faire which itself emanates from the pre-Ricardian notions of the so-called free market. I don't think that the debate has been frozen at that point of origin for all these years. Rather, there have been constant struggles. In our own time, a whole range of theories—Marxist certainly but even liberal-feminist, secular, anti-colonial and anti-racist theories, not to speak of the extremely complicated discourses of minority rights—which have amply demonstrated that the supposedly attribute-less individual that laissez-faire liberalism proposes is, under the ideological surface, none other than the white bourgeois male. And that even liberal theory must face up to the fact that the individual who might be not-male, not-white, not-bourgeois cannot be called upon to surrender her attributes to an abstract universality.

The whole issue of the commensurability of universal rights with rights of various kinds of minorities is at least as old as Locke. Historically, the capitalist state has of course not granted to workers or women the rights that should be theirs but an idea is commonly held that there *are* rights that are specific to workers as workers and to women as women. There is an idea of the right of historical redress, in the form of affirmative actions, for sections of the population whose present disadvantage is rooted in the accumulated oppressions of the past. In the advanced capitalist countries, the state is in the process of being pushed to accommodate itself to the rights of the elderly, the physically handicapped. Everywhere in the world, the illiberal as well as the liberal are being called upon to accommodate themselves to the rights that are specific to what remains of those indigenous peoples whose lives are constantly shattered by capitalism's conquest of Nature. A recognition is beginning to dawn upon political theory

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that situations of individuals and communities are so various that the secondary structure of particular rights will cumulatively far surpass the underlying structure of universal rights. Neither the beginning of trade union rights in the nineteenth century nor the expanding structure of women's rights in the twentieth; neither the civil rights legislation in the United States nor the ideology of the welfare state in Western Europe, would be conceivable outside the extremely difficult problematic of reconciling, on the terrain of practical social covenants, the universal and the particular.

None of it has given us anything resembling what I might mean by socialism but there have been people's struggles and those struggles have sought a simultaneity of both universal and particular rights. I think we do a great disservice to the memory of those struggles when we speak only of what they *failed* to achieve and not of what they *did* achieve. And we do a great disservice to *ourselves* because that *is* our own history. The common people, the people who fought for a decent life, always said, let's all have equal rights but let's also take care of those who have special needs. They didn't have fancy language but they knew what we, as intellectuals, mean by "universal" and "particular."

What I am trying to say, I think, is that we certainly need the most rigorous of theories but we also need to have memories of the traditions of mercy and the struggles for justice. It is only there that any true reconciliation of the universal and particular is really possible.

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U.S. RACE RELATIONS AT THE CROSSROADS IN CALIFORNIA

by ANTHONY M. PLATT

The Nation has not yet found peace from its sins
—W.E.B. Du Bois, 1903

An American looks like a wounded person
whose wound is hidden from others,
and sometimes from herself. An American looks like me.
—Alice Walker, 1992

If you believe, as I do, in racial equality as a matter of moral principle and in the incompatibility of political democracy with racial hierarchy, then you will no doubt agree that we live in very difficult times, and that the end of the millennium gives more grounds for sorrow than celebration. Optimism is more than difficult when so many visions have gone unrealized and so much ground has been lost. Because race is such a deep and enduring wound in the body politic, the struggle for racial equality (even in its few optimistic moments) requires us to always keep a sharp lookout for that "hellhound on my trail," to quote bluesman Robert Johnson. In California, voters will decide in the upcoming November

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1996 elections whether or not to repudiate all state-mandated affirmative action policies, as proposed by the so-called "California Civil Rights Initiative." The hellhound, for those of us who live in California, is at the door. We have a massive effort before us in the days remaining until the referendum. It may be useful to stop for a moment and describe the situation we are in and how we have come here.

"Inspiration strives with doubt, and faith with vain questionings," wrote W.E.B. Du Bois at the beginning of this twentieth century; the "American Century" as it would be called by chauvinists sounding the trumpets of "manifest destiny." But to millions, the new century was born in blood and disappointment. *The Souls of Black Folk* (written by Du Bois in 1903) was a lament for and reclamation of the lost promise of the era of Reconstruction that followed the Civil War. The final reversal of Reconstruction had occurred in 1896, exactly one century ago, a year in which seventy seven African Americans were lynched and the Supreme Court announced the principle of "separate but equal" as the law of the land in *Plessy v. Ferguson.* The Court upheld the decision of a Louisiana state court that had convicted Homer Plessy, a man whose one-eighth African origins made him a Negro, of refusing to move to the "colored" section of a railroad car. "Enforced segregation of the two races," wrote Justice Henry B. Brown for the Court, does not stamp "the colored race with a badge of inferiority. If this be so," he concluded, it is "because the colored race chooses to put that construction on it."

Du Bois knew that the *Plessy* decision was the burial of the first wave of the civil rights movement. "The bright ideals of the past," he wrote in 1903, "physical freedom, political power, the training of brains, and the training of hands—all these in turn have waxed and waned, until even the last grows dim and overcast." His pessimism was not misplaced. White supremacy, backed by lynchings and upheld by the Courts, would reign brazenly supreme for over two generations until another Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), marked the emergence of a new wave in the long

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struggle for civil rights. Now the Supreme Court belatedly was made to recognize the "inherently unequal" structure of racial segregation. Du Bois had lived not only to see the first wave ebb but to witness the next wave arise and grow; "I have seen the impossible happen," he said.

The new movement generated pioneering legislative, legal and regulatory victories, as well as the formal repudiation of a segregated public life. President Kennedy's 1961 Executive Order 10925, which for the first time linked the phrase "affirmative action" to civil rights enforcement policy, was backed up with passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and other legislation, with Supreme Court decisions ordering tough remedies to undo racism, and with the establishment of hiring goals and timetables in the Nixon administration.

One generation later we find ourselves once again in the midst of a precipitous regression. There are no waves of lynchings in 1996, but as pointed out by Eric Foner, the leading historian of Reconstruction, the "interrelated areas of housing and schools remain predominantly segregated, if not by law then by custom buttressed by economics and public policy." And Black churches are still being burned to the ground by white supremacists in the South, and white men in Texas still think it's a sport to hunt down and kill African Americans; and here in California the police still appear to think nothing of beefing up the arrest of urban Blacks, Chicanos and Mexican migrants with a good beating. While public spaces in the United States are no longer formally restricted or legally segregated, it is still the case that most people of color, on a daily basis, think twice about how they can best survive the day without experiencing paternalism, humiliation, insults, rudeness, or much, much worse. This racism is a "profound disorder," to use Wendell Berry's metaphor, an "historical wound ... as complex and deep in my flesh as blood and nerves."

A century ago the political and judicial system turned unabashedly (and viciously) against the principle of racial equality. Today, you will hardly find a public figure who will openly defend white supremacy. Even the known racists in

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public now speak of a "color-blind" society and readily quote Martin Luther King. But now a consensus in both major parties has approved as acceptable the coded appeal to racism of speaking out against "preferences," adding to the appeals to "law and order" or against "welfare" that have well served the same purpose from President Clinton down to the meanest local hack. Across the nation there is a gathering attack on affirmative action, the primary judicial and legislative mechanism for moving the United States in the direction of racial equality. Affirmative action is currently under severe attack in both Houses of Congress and thirty five states are considering legislation to eliminate or severely restrict its use, apart from the California referendum.

Meanwhile the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit has declared, in *Hopwood v. Texas* (1996), that colleges can no longer rely on prior judicial opinions (even the Supreme Court's 1978 *Bakke* case) which allowed limited use of race among the criteria for admissions in order to achieve some degree of diversity in the student body. The Fifth Circuit ruled that "*any* consideration of race or ethnicity... for the purpose of achieving a diverse student body is not a compelling interest under the Fourteenth Amendment" (emphasis added). The *Hopwood* case remains the law in the Fifth Circuit, since the U.S. Supreme Court has refused to review it. Four Supreme Court Justices seem prepared to terminate affirmative action altogether, another four are perhaps ready to defend a very restricted use of affirmative action, and the swing vote is in the decidedly non-liberal hands of Justice Sandra Day O'Connor.

The parallels to *Plessy* and the age that saw the death of the last achievements of Reconstruction are ominous for the remaining achievements of the Civil Rights Era. But there are important differences as well, and if we are to avoid the dread result we must consider the process that has brought us to this point in the long, difficult journey away from race supremacy.

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A Call to Life

O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me.
And yet I swear this oath-
America will be!
An ever-living seed,
Its dream
Lies deep in the heart of me.
—Langston Hughes, 1938

The 1950s are frequently considered the starting point of the second wave of the civil rights struggle, but its roots go much deeper. Between the end of Reconstruction and the movement that resumed after the Second World War there was widespread resistance, albeit largely suppressed (and by terror, as the lynching statistics prove). The successes that were finally achieved in national legislation and judicial decision were the culmination of a long struggle, a changing political climate, and an expanding economy fueled by war and permanent preparation for war. Twentieth century liberalism, from Progressivism through the New Deal, was always able to coexist with racism, but at least prepared the way back to the rights of citizenship. After World War Two, the new dominant bipartisan Cold War governing elite knew that the virtues of "U.S. Democracy" broadcast in the propaganda war directed at the African, Asian, and Latin American continents could not be credibly peddled as long as white supremacy was the law of the land back home.

Once the white supremacy regime began to weaken, there was no holding back a movement that was the broadest and most inclusive struggle for justice the U.S. had seen since the Civil War. Openly racist conditions existed everywhere across the nation. Immigrants such as Carlos Bulosan arrived in the 1930s from his village in the Philippines expecting to find "a prophecy of a new society," but instead encountered a country of "great hatred" that made him feel as though he were living on an even smaller "island" than the one he had left; his new home, he wrote, was a place where "the lives of

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Philipinos were cheaper than those of dogs." "What did our kids actually fight for," asked Fannie Lou Hamer about the thousands of Black men who expected that a willingness to risk death for one's country in two world wars would be rewarded with full equality. "They would go in the service and go through all that," she said, explaining how raised expectations can lead to struggle, "and come right out to be drowned in the river in Mississippi."

It was this kind of embittered hope that created the conditions for a mass movement and forced a liberal state to concede much more than it had ever bargained for. Over two decades, a broad and deep progressive grassroots activism brought pressure from every quarter. In addition to a complex array of liberal, radical, nationalist (and even revolutionary) African American organizations, there was also a vibrant American Indian Movement in the heartland, an upsurge of nationalism among Puerto Ricans, a Latino movement for land in the Southwest and a militant farmworker union in California, and the beginnings of an Asian American youth movement and Japanese-American demands for reparations on the West Coast. Moreover, these struggles for racial equality crisscrossed with the predominantly white and middle class student and feminist movements, and suddenly with barely the shadow of precedent there also emerged a whole generation of gay and lesbian activists who left the closet for public struggle.

We should not forget or value lightly the profound changes that took place in one generation in the race relations of the United States. True, the civil rights movement was not revolutionary in its politics, but it was not simply reformist. It required a battering ram to make a breach in a very well fortified structure of "racial dictatorship," to use the apt term of Michael Omi and Howard Winant. In addition to generating government policies and court cases (that must be understood as *responsive*), the struggle also educated millions about the history and consequences of racism, and mobilized the powerless to try and make the most of their newly won rights. The movement created an anti-racist political culture that

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resonated with deep moral authority, so that even in the mean climate of today it can only be attacked by indirection. Many activists were brought into the machinery of government to attempt to ensure that the civil rights decisions were put into practice. As Alice Walker observed, "it gave us hope for tomorrow. It called us to life."

Congress responded over the years by expanding the 1964 Civil Rights Act to include rights and benefits for an array of constituencies that had been systematically deprived of substantive equality in United States society. "Affirmative action" is typically the name that we give to that complex of policies and regulations that transformed into government action the broad recognition that life in the United States was deeply and patently unfair to many groups in society. Part symbolic, part very practical, "affirmative action" stands for the recognition that racism is systematic and embedded in institutions by history, and that it requires sustained, long-term, ongoing policy initiatives if it is to be offset. It was a hard won redistributive measure based (like virtually all governmental entitlements or subsidies) on preferential group policies.

Let us not shy away from the word "preferential." That's the way power has always worked. But prior to the changes worked by the popular movements of the 1960s, for all practical purposes it was white men alone—and only a small portion of us—who benefited from a system of preferences and affirmative action in the critical forms of inherited wealth, higher and professional education, and "access to vital networks and other social capital," as Orlando Patterson puts it. I know from first-hand experience about the so-called "merit system." With the help of a private prep school I was able to get into a well known English secondary school that bequeathed us the term "meritocracy." I came to California in 1963 to do graduate work, my immigration from England facilitated by an immigration policy (the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924) which preferred newcomers from Northwestern Europe over the rest of the world. I was admitted to Berkeley largely on the preferential basis of appearing to be a British

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gentleman with an undergraduate degree from Oxford. And at Berkeley my career benefited from an all white doctoral program that in effect meant that I did not have to engage in fair competition with all my peers.

Affirmative action in the 1970s aided the entry into formerly exclusive and segregated professions (especially academia, law, and medicine) of a generation of African Americans, Latinos, and white women. Major changes also occurred in the political participation of people of color. African Americans, who had been almost invisible at the Democratic Party's convention in 1940, provided some eighteen percent of the delegates by 1984. In about the same time period, the number of elected black officials went from 33 to over 6,000, and from 10 judges to over 840.

It is true, as sociologist Orlando Patterson has observed, that affirmative action was never intended to help the most destitute and unskilled. Yet because it was accompanied by a "war on poverty," a still expanding public sector and activist grassroots movements, it did more than add color to the middle class. Jobs opened up for African Americans, Chicanos, Latinos, Puerto Ricans and white women in places that a decade earlier had been off limits. During the Johnson administration the federal government, backed up by liberal and reforming elements in the federal judiciary, required federal contractors to take affirmative action to ensure equal opportunity in employment. This had far reaching consequences because federal contractors employed about one third of the country's private sector work force. Later, under the Philadelphia Plan implemented by Nixon's Labor Department in 1969, under-represented workers, primarily African American men and white women, made it into the lower ranks of the high paying skilled trade unions as ironworkers, electricians, heavy equipment operators and other prized jobs.

The gains were uneven. The struggle for justice and against racism has always been uneven, with at times some groups benefiting and others not. For example, while African Americans made unprecedented but briefly maintained

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political gains during Reconstruction, American Indians were experiencing the culmination of a century of genocidal slaughter, their shattered remnants transported into the desert and their (frequently orphaned) children transported to government boarding schools that would attempt to imbue them "with the exalting egotism of American civilization...." More recently, the middle class Cubans who fled Cuba after the revolution and the Vietnamese elites who fled Saigon at the end of the Vietnam War found an America far more hospitable than that encountered by the Laotian and Cambodian refugees of the same period, the later "Marielito" immigrants from Cuba, or the Haitians, all of whom arrived with nothing and discovered an America paved with hard stone. Yet the gains of the last decades made a dent in occupational and educational segregation across the board. Today in California Asian Americans, Latinos, poor whites, and African Americans are being turned each against the other, and modest gains in civil rights hang in the balance.

Living With Inequality

You mean that , halfway through,
With the game all but over, you'd like
To change the rules of play?
—Primo Levi, 1984

The precariousness of the gains in the fight against racism is evident when we look at the shift that has taken place in the cultural political climate of the United States in the last 25 years. In 1968, the Kerner Report—the most honest statement about race and U.S. society ever issued by the federal government—provided seemingly unassailable moral authority for the conclusion that we live in a "separate and unequal" society; it was an indictment of the hypocrisy of American democracy. The Kerner Report represented the most optimistic aspect of Liberalism, namely that racial antagonisms are non-rational legacies of early modern society that will wither away under the relentless pressure of Reason, Science and Progress imposed by an interventionist tech-

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nocratic state. But by 1994 this Liberalism was dead, replaced in no small part by the openly racist social biology of Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve*, with its repudiation of the possibility of social reform. "Trying to eradicate inequality with artificially manufactured outcomes has led to disaster," they conclude. "It is time for America once again to try living with inequality, as life is lived...."

The Bell Curve is neither the work of cranks nor an anomaly. While dismissed as pseudo-science in the serious academy, it is representative of the ideological cover for racism that unites the neoliberals and neoconservatives in Washington, D.C. and resonates widely in the commercial media. In public and political discourse, progressive and complex historical views of race in U.S. society are now all but absent, having been marginalized to the academy and powerless pockets of intellectuals, and more generally the affected groups themselves. This represents a dramatic change, connected to processes in our political and economic life. The "golden age" of vigorous economic growth of the post-war era that permitted a space for ameliorating economic injustice ended in the early 1970s. Economic stagnation brought back the iron fist and hard face of "market" deregulation (and tax cuts for the wealthy) that has led to a violent redistribution of wealth toward the rich, and is reflected in the rise to power of the Reagan wing in the Republican party and the "New Democrat" (Clinton) wing in the Democratic party. Tacit appeals to racism have been among the central means by which this reversal was achieved.

With respect to issues of racial equality, these reversals have been fast and furious. Efforts to integrate the public schools, already crippled by "white flight" to the suburbs, have been largely abandoned in the face of deepening economic polarization, tax cuts that undercut even basic public services, and by the policies of a federal judiciary in the most part appointed in the age that commenced with Ronald Reagan. In a series of cases that involved public school integration plans, but also federal contracts, electoral districts, and race-based scholarships, the Supreme Court gave the go ahead to

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the lower courts to eviscerate what had been a political, social and moral mandate. Now affirmative action must be "narrowly tailored," "serve a compelling national interest," and be "subject to strict scrutiny." Laws that could neither be formally repealed nor judicially reinterpreted out of existence were deprived of meaning by the end of vigorous enforcement. For example, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the main federal agency that investigates complaints of bias in employment, now has a backlog of more than 90,000 cases. The federal contract compliance program, which had a significant impact in compelling federal contractors to hire workers of color, "virtually ceased to exist in all but name after 1980," according to Jonathan Leonard.

Those who want to roll back policies of affirmative action today in California admit if pressed that there once was racial injustice but argue that these days it is gone. To answer them, we must acknowledge that some progress has occurred, but also show the continuing reality of racial injustice and explain the reasons for the political pull of the new wave of coded appeals to racism.

Decent jobs have steadily (and disproportionately) disappeared for the great majority of people of color and the job future looks very bleak. The prospect is for further growth in temporary low-paying (mostly part-time) service jobs and hustling in the irregular and illegal economy. The consequent racial disproportions in the gigantic and growing U.S. prison gulag (largest in the world) have been widely observed. The U.S. military has become a refuge from a hostile economy for large numbers of African Americans and Latinos. Between 1970 and 1990 the proportion of Blacks in the military almost doubled. But where in the past, as Karen Sacks has noted, the military was on occasion a route of upward mobility for the working class, those days are over. The GI bill no longer offers adequate incentives for further education and training. Even for the middle class, the progress in integrating higher education has come to a halt and is being reversed. In Mississippi, where college tuition costs now represent about forty percent

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of the annual income of an average Black family, fewer African Americans earned bachelor degrees in 1991 than in 1979.

Affirmative action was first put into practice when the economy generally and in particular higher education and the public sector were expanding, and there was growth in middle class jobs and in the professions. White middle class youth supported the civil rights struggle out of social solidarity and political commitment. But it did not hurt that progress toward justice for Blacks and Chicanos did not mean losses for Anglos. In the 1990s we face very different circumstances. Affirmative action in times of cutbacks and contraction means a more racially equitable distribution of burdens, and more and more Anglos begin to experience their whiteness as a protection from misery that they cannot afford to disregard. White working class men and their families have also lost economic ground in the great polarization of wealth of the last generation, and their sons and daughters face a precarious future. The aspiring white middle class must pay formidable amounts of money for college education, must compete more to get into good schools, and has no guarantee that a degree will lead to upward mobility. Just as the Irish did in the racial conflicts of the nineteenth century, today many Euro -Americans are asserting their whiteness out of a sense of defensiveness and insecurity. In a controlled rightwing political culture that prohibits public mention of taxing the rich, a racist hysteria is deliberately encouraged among "angry" (read "scared") white men. *The Bell Curve's* appeal to "try living with inequality" is useful indeed.

Twilight

So twilight
is
that time
between day and night.
Limbo,
I call it limbo
—Anna Deavere Smith, 1993

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To return to the question I raised earlier, I do not think that we are heading back to the days of *Plessy* and a formal, open, system of white supremacy. But I do think that our era shares a great deal in common with the age of the aftermath of Reconstruction. They both represent moments of transition when it is possible to see more clearly and feel more deeply the "two-ness"—the possibility and its negation—that Du Bois described so vividly in *The Souls of Black Folk.* We made ground toward justice, and then fell back. Our generation experienced a sense of optimism of the possibility of achieving the vision of racial equality, only then to be overwhelmed, in the words of the historian Leon Litwack, by the "terrifying sense of personal betrayal and anguish" that comes from living in a society that seems "impossible to overcome—or to escape." We went from real success in a struggle that drew upon the best traditions of American activism—what Langston Hughes called the "dream" that "lies deep in the heart of me"—to one that draws upon the most mean spirited populist traditions of racism and white supremacy. "So kind and yet so cruel," is how Carlos Bulosan summed up his experience in the United States.

There is much evidence to confirm the impression that race is a sufficiently deep wound to make the patient fatally ill, and that a non-racialized democracy may not be possible in the United States. After all, we live in a land whose original inhabitants were virtually exterminated. In California, by 1910 over sixty percent of the original California tribes were extinct or close to extinction. No sooner had the Anglos arrived in California than they turned in a racist fury on the Chinese. The United States seized California in a war of aggression against Mexico. Today Mexicans (many "illegal" in a land robbed from their ancestors) are the chosen targets of Anglo hysteria. No part of the history of California is unstained by race hatred.

At moments like this, when all that we fought for seems so tenuous, it is difficult to stay the course. But this is not the time to retreat from affirmative action and the principles of racial equality. The more we concede, the more they will take.

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We can learn this lesson from the time of McCarthyism when the majority of intellectuals, liberals, and university officials acquiesced or cooperated in the witch hunts. We need to face this crisis—"bring this thing out to the light" as Fannie Lou Hamer liked to say—rather than bury it in amnesia or pretense. In the twilight, to use Anna Deavere Smith's metaphor for our racial crisis, it is important that we sharpen our vision. "We might not like what we see," she says "but in order to change it, we have to see it clearly."

Also, we need to revisit the issue of integration. Politically, it is not a concept that is advocated very much these days, as we are presumably learning to live, once again, with inequality and segregation. In the academy the idea is out of fashion. The teaching of "multiculturalism," with its respect for difference and uniqueness, typically accepts the basic premises of segregation and apartness. "It is too often forgotten," observes Eric Foner, "that integration is a very radical idea." It is not necessarily the same as assimilation, that is, the "absorption" of the Other into a preexisting and unchanging Eurocentric cultural paradigm. Integration of economic and political institutions could yet fulfill the promise of "a vision of a nation transformed, one in which equality is a reality for all Americans."

Our difficult challenge is to imagine the struggle for racial justice as a project that can potentially reach the majority of Americans. Despite the history of institutionalized racism and its continued reproduction in new forms, despite public opinion polls that confirm the worst, I share James Baldwin's hope that beneath the arrogance of white American racism we can also find "power and sorrow, both unadmitted [and] unrealized, the power of inventors, the sorrow of the disconnected." In the words of a great writer whose life plumbed the extremes of injustice and liberation, hope and despair:

This year in fear and shame,
Next year in virtue and justice.
—Primo Levi, 1982

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BOOKS

Lenin as Left-Hegelian: Reason and Revolution

by Paul Le Blanc

Kevin Anderson, *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism, A Critical Study* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995) 311 pp.

Very few university professors today choose to begin scholarly works on political philosophy with such comments as these:

The critics of Hegelian and Marxist thought often suggest that we need to accept the "permanence" of capitalism and its world economy, working within it through multiparty democracy or in small-scale social movements that would avoid the dangers of a "totalizing" perspective. I think that such critiques are in large part misplaced and represent more the capitulation of some radical intellectuals to the status quo than an accurate reading either of the history of Marxism or of the theoretical needs of the present moment. These arguments grew out of the retrogressive Reagan-Bush-Thatcher social agenda, which persisted for over a decade in the industrially developed countries, a development that was very discouraging to leftist intellectuals of all types. They also flowed out of the failure of either the Eastern European upheavals of 1989 or the Third World revolutions of the 1970s to create a viable "third way" between totalitarian Communism and free-market capitalism. Thus, many grudgingly accepted that the Reagan-Bush agenda would prevail for many years to come.

By the early 1990s, however, as the fires of Los Angeles went off like a loud alarm clock in the American psyche, the Bush-Reagan mandate melted away overnight, as Blacks, Latinos, gay and lesbian activists, and above all, women found their voices. Communism and the Third World were not alone in

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facing crisis; Western capitalism was in the deepest crisis it had ever seen since the Great Depression, with unemployment at catastrophic levels once again, especially in Europe. Along with this came the rise of neofascist movements in Central and Western Europe and outright genocide in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda.... In Latin America the year 1994 opened with an uprising by indigenous peasants in Chiapas, Mexico, just as the Mexican government was celebrating its free-trade agreement in the United States. In 1994 the United States seemed to veer once again to the right. In the light of these deep crises, most of which are connected to the persistently intractable world economic crisis, I believe it is only a matter of time before...radical intellectuals begin to return to some form of the perspectives of Hegel and Marx.

The author is Kevin Anderson, who argues the contemporary relevance of the political thought of someone who is portrayed as a dead dog by innumerable capitalist boosters and discouraged leftists: Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. Anderson's book, *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism, A Critical Study*, despite certain limitations, makes a substantial contribution to the scholarship on Marxism, on Lenin, and on the interrelationship of philosophy and revolutionary theory. Specifically, this is the first book-length examination of Lenin's own 1914-15 studies of the early 19th century German philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Lenin took up these studies at what would seem an odd historical moment: the eruption of the First World War, the collapse of the Socialist International, and the quickening of a revolutionary upsurge that would yield both a new wave of anti-colonial national liberation struggles and the Russian Revolution of 1917. Anderson demonstrates—far more thoroughly than preceding scholars who have argued the point (such as Michael Löwy, one of several whom Anderson approvingly cites)—that these in-depth studies of Hegel's dialectical philosophy influenced the Russian revolutionary in a manner that culminated in: (1) a powerful Marxist critique of the so-called "orthodox Marxism" of the Second International, (2) a penetrating analysis of the imperialist origins of the catastrophic World War, (3) an original analysis of nationalism and national liberation struggles, and (4) an innovative and radically democratic approach to the questions of the state and revolution.

The philosophical conception of *dialectics* was seen by many in the Second International as being simply another way of expressing naturalist Charles Darwin's notion of evolution, but Anderson notes that for Hegel, Marx, and the mature Lenin, it is far more dynamic than that: reality evolves through the interaction and interpenetration of various and often conflicting components. Through such dynamic self-development, aspects of reality can—often with a

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revolutionary suddenness—turn into something qualitatively different from what they first seemed to be. The dialectical notion "negation of the negation" involves a set of transformations and counter-transformations in which realities can be at the same time preserved and transcended in ways that seem to defy logic—unless one's logic is dialectical. Dismissed as metaphysical hocus-pocus by many grounded in Anglo-American philosophical traditions (including such one-time Marxists as Sidney Hook and Max Eastman), dialectics is shown in *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism* to be a vital intellectual tool for grasping realities and potentialities of our time.

This is not a perfect book: we will see that aspects of Anderson's research leave something to be desired. But much of it reveals a capacity for thoroughness, an attention to scholarly detail, and an intellectual clarity—all animated by the passion suggested in the above excerpt—that are immensely refreshing in a period when scholarly fashions dictate the "Lenin-as-dead-dog" motif. An obvious source that Anderson has drawn from is a subterranean current that took such things seriously fifty years ago: the Johnson-Forest tendency, a tiny grouping inside the U.S. Trotskyist movement, viewed harshly by some people as a bizarre little cult wrapped within an only slightly larger sect. At first blush, this seems as strange as Lenin immersing himself in Hegel studies in 1914. Yet the Johnson-Forest tendency distinguished itself not only by a passionate engagement with the ideas of such people as Trotsky, Lenin, Luxemburg and Marx, but also with an incredibly serious concern over the philosophical dimensions of revolutionary Marxism. Because of this, they produced the first English translations of Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Notebooks of 1844* and of Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks of 1914-15*, and they launched the first serious discussions on the political implications of all this.

"Johnson" was, in fact, C.L.R. James, the great Marxist historian, culture critic, and Pan-Africanist whose contributions have recently excited considerable enthusiasm among substantial sectors of what remains of the left-wing intelligentsia. "Forest" was the formidable Raya Dunayevskaya, who inspired feminist theorist Adrienne Rich to comment recently: "We can be sure that Marxism is no more dead than the women's liberation movement is dead, that the ways of reading Marx that Raya mapped for us are more challenging than ever in our time." The third leader of this current was Grace Lee Boggs, a trained philosopher who with her husband James Boggs was to advance influential analyses in the pages of *Monthly Review* in the 1960s and after. Anderson comments on "how unusual the Johnson-Forest Tendency theorists—a Black man and

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two women—must have appeared to the New York intellectuals" who were so influential in the 1940s and early '50s.

The fact that Anderson does take such people seriously—especially (and uncritically) Raya Dunayevskaya—arms him, to some extent, against the dismissiveness of today's mainstream scholars in regard to Marx and Lenin. If he can swallow Dunayevskaya as a figure of some intellectual importance, then he can hardly be expected to choke on Lenin just because fashions deem the Russian revolutionary to be "irrelevant." The fact is that Dunayevskaya, along with James and her other erstwhile cothinkers, *should* be taken seriously. Earlier than most on the Left, those who were in or influenced by the Johnson-Forest tendency developed a serious theoretical approach to Black liberation and women's liberation struggles—recognizing their inherent validity, the need for their relative independence, and the revolutionary dynamic in their relationship to the no less important struggles of the working class. Inseparable from this was the seriousness with which they studied Lenin, Marx and Hegel. Anderson utilizes the approach of the Johnson-Forest comrades, although the results don't strike this reviewer as fully satisfactory.

Following especially the perspectives expressed by Dunayevskaya, Anderson argues that Marx and the philosophically mature Lenin transcended what he views as the sterile counterposition of "materialism" versus "idealism." His analysis here is interesting, but he merges it with a dubious line of thought advanced by all-too-many other scholars (including his mentor): a philosophical divergence between Marx and Engels—of which the two revolutionaries seem to have been unaware—led Engels to foster a "vulgar-materialist" Marxism which undermined the revolutionary theoretical fiber of the Second International. Yet here Anderson doesn't really make his case. He gives no serious attention to *Anti-Duhring* or other works by Engels, aside from a somewhat superficial critique of *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, adding a quibble over Engels's insertion of the word "however" in Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: "philosophers have *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point [however] is to change it." (This "unintentionally...but severely distorted" Marx, we are told, by giving the thesis "a more activist, antiphilosophical tone.") Anderson also trashes Lenin's 1908 philosophical polemic *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* for similarly fostering a crude and non-revolutionary "orthodox Marxism." While Lenin's 1908 work is hardly above criticism, the author contents himself with simply making negative references to it. He fails to offer an independent

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analysis—or to engage with critical but positive analyses of the early Lenin by such authors he cites as David-Hillel Ruben or Helena Sheehan. Nor does he rise to the challenge of such scholarship as Joseph Ferraro's *Freedom and Determinism in History According to Marx and Engels*, which throws into question the alleged theoretical split of Engels from Marx.

On the other hand, Anderson's analyses of Lenin's post-1914 writings, especially *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* and the various pieces on nationalism and national liberation struggles, are serious and constitute an important contribution. And his connection of these theoretical advances to Lenin's deeper reading of Hegel—which undoubtedly *did* lead, as Anderson shows, to shifts in the quality of Lenin's Marxism—is persuasive:

> Lenin connects dialectics to the creative application of Marxism in a revolutionary situation. He makes this specific for an issue that the West European social democrats had ignored or played down: the revolutionary potential of what is today termed the Third World. Most important here is that Lenin has outlined fairly explicitly his concept of dialectic and his concept of imperialism and national liberation.

More than this, Lenin "seems to view the national revolutions as an independent revolutionary subject (if not alongside the working class, then certainly 'one of the bacilli') that helps to bring on the socialist revolution. Lenin's theory of imperialism has become dialectical in the sense of pointing not only to the economic side of imperialism but also to *a new revolutionary subject* arising from within global imperialism: national liberation movements." The implications of this for other "revolutionary subjects" (i.e., those rising up against other forms of oppression—such as oppression related to gender and sexuality) are not clearly developed here, but Anderson's line of thought—and Lenin's—appears to open the way. The *interconnections* of oppression around class, race/nationality, and gender are beyond the scope of Anderson's study. But his analysis suggests that such further theoretical work is central to the kind of penetrating Marxist analysis that Lenin initiated in 1914.

Another strength of Anderson's work is the serious attention he gives to a number of influential and philosophically-oriented theorists who focused on the Hegel-Marx-Lenin problematic, such as Georg Lukács, Henri Lefebvre, Herbert Marcuse, Leszek Kolakowski, Lucio Colletti, Louis Althusser. While sharply challenging the assaults on Hegel and/or Marx of the last three theorists, he is appreciative of Marcuse, Lukács, and Lefebvre—although by no means uncritical. "Even such important Hegelian Marxists as Lukács and Lefebvre played down the break in Lenin's thought in his 1914

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encounter with Hegel," he complains. "In their readings of the Hegel *Notebooks*, they gave primacy to Lenin's ideas about practice rather than to his engagement with Hegel's idealistic categories such as subjectivity, self-movement, and consciousness, categories that have been so important in debates within Western Marxism as well as in feminist and Black thought from the 1960s onward."

For all of its strengths, however, this work of political philosophy suffers from a disconcerting abstractness. Lenin is treated as a philosopher more than as a practical revolutionary leader, and this introduces odd distortions. Diverse writers who emphasize Lenin's role as such a leader are accused by Anderson of "treating Lenin's theoretical work as being primarily political or organizational in an immediate sense," and as failing to see Lenin "as an original political and social theorist whose ideas affected his political practice." In this manner the author unpersuasively lumps together the Cold War anti-Communist Leonard Schapiro (who deserves the criticism) with the British left-wing socialist Tony Cliff. Whatever Cliff's imperfections, he has an active appreciation for Lenin as a serious Marxist theorist *who was committed to building a revolutionary party capable of rallying vanguard sectors of the working class around a Marxist political program.* The problem is that Anderson rejects Lenin's perspectives on the revolutionary party, seeing them as related to the "vulgar Marxist" views that he complains Lenin held in 1908.

The problem manifests itself again in Anderson's mostly excellent discussion of Lenin's 1917 classic *The State and Revolution*, in which he effectively defends its libertarian content from trendy bourgeois critics such as A.J. Polan. He demonstrates that for Lenin "the dictatorship of the proletariat" represents a radical working-class democracy. "Creative activity at the grass roots is the basic factor of the new public life," Lenin wrote in yet another 1917 writing. "Socialism cannot be decreed from above. Its spirit rejects the mechanical bureaucratic approach; living, creative socialism is the product of the masses themselves." But Anderson is not happy with Lenin's continued adherence to the concept of a revolutionary party, which is characterized as the negative element in "Lenin's paradoxical legacy." So intent is he on separating the "bad" Lenin from the good, that Anderson claims "in 1917 the notion of the party almost disappeared from his writings"—which tells us more about the author's tunnel vision than it does about Lenin in 1917. While *State and Revolution* has little to say about the question of the revolutionary party, Lenin was writing, saying, and doing much else in 1917 that directly involved the role of such a party in a revolution-

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ary situation. *Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?* is the tell-tale title of one pamphlet from this period.

Anderson states that after writing *What Is To be Done?* in 1902, "Lenin never worked out a newer, more dialectical concept of organization." But this flies in the face of so much else that he has demonstrated. How could Lenin's conception of the party (in stark contrast to his thinking on so many other vital questions) *not* become more dialectical with the accumulation of study, reflection, and political experience? Why would the study of Hegel fail to influence this central component of Lenin's thinking? This is especially problematical since there exist lengthy and well-documented accounts arguing that the conception of the revolutionary party—like Lenin's thought on many questions even before 1914—had a profoundly dialectical quality. "The Leninist theory of organization represents, broadly speaking, the deepening of Marxism, applied to the basic problems of the social superstructure (the state, class consciousness, ideology, the party)," Ernest Mandel wrote in such a study some years ago, adding: "Together with the parallel contributions of Rosa Luxemburg and Trotsky (and, in a more limited sense of Lukács and Gramsci) *it constitutes the Marxist science of the subjective factor*" ("The Leninist Theory of Organization," in Ernest Mandel, *Revolutionary Marxism and Social Reality in the 20th Century, Collected Essays* [Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1994], p. 80). It is conceivable that Mandel is wrong, but Anderson doesn't show this to be the case.

One of Anderson's most substantial sources on all of this is a quote from Raya Dunayevskaya: "Unfortunately, the great transformation in Lenin, both on philosophy and on the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat, did not extend to Lenin's concept of the party, which, despite all modifications in actual revolutions, remained essentially what it was in 1903." Interesting as is Dunayevskaya's assertion, it does not make up for the lack of the careful textual analysis of which Anderson is quite clearly capable, not to mention the absence of any serious historical analysis of the 1917 revolution. Lenin made mistakes, it can be argued, that undermined the radical socialist democracy that was his goal (disastrous mistakes can be found especially in the Civil War period of 1918-1921, as he himself pointed out). Nor was Lenin's earlier political thought free of blind spots. Such problems could be fruitfully explored by a critical scholar such as Anderson if he was not diverted from such explorations by taking the easier but less fruitful path of vanguard-bashing.

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Such limitations should not blind us to the book's genuine qualities. "This study attempts to open up debate about Lenin's Marxism," Anderson tells us, adding: "The discussion of Lenin's thought needs to break away from the confines of either Marxist-Leninist canonization or dismissively hostile Western critiques, something that happened long ago with Marx and even with Lenin's fellow revolutionary leaders who were also theorists, such as Luxemburg or Trotsky." Hannah Arendt once referred to "the grandeur and powerful attraction" of Lenin's perspectives, Anderson observes, but more than this, there are the crises we face today, generating searching discussion among increasing numbers of people over what is happening and what we must do. Anderson insists that "a rereading of Lenin's work on the dialectic proper and on the dialectics of revolution can make some contributions to these discussions." *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism* shows this to be true.

(Continued from inside back cover)

The foregoing analysis of this arrangement, we hope, has made clear that it was based on a shaky foundation from the beginning and that it had no chance of surviving without the special conditions that gave rise to it. In the event the fatal blow turned out to be the end of the economic boom that began shortly after the war and petered out in the recession of 1974-75. Both capital and labor were hit hard, but neither had a plan or stategy for coping with the new situation. The immediate result was several years of confusion and fumbling. But by the end of the decade capital in the two bellwether countries—the United States and Britain—had got its act together, electing extreme right-wing governments and openly declaring all-out war on labor. The crucial battles of course were the coalminers' strike of 1984 in Britain and the PATCO strike in the United States. These two events ushered in the period of the heavy preponderance of the power of capital which is still with us.

Since then the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War have greatly increased the relative power of capital on a global scale. At the same time signs that capital has an intention, let alone plans, for using its power constructively are totally lacking. Similarly, there are no indications anywhere on the horizon that the globalized capitalist system is capable of spontaneous upsurges of a kind that might ease the burdens of the crises generated by its multifarious contradictions.

In these circumstances, it seems to us that to talk, as Hobsbawm does, about the future of the European left (or any other left for that matter) depending on center-left government to find a viable mix of private and public interests is to trivialize history and refuse to look at the stark realities of the crisis imposed by capitalism on all of us.

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Take Me, I'm Yours

by Doug Dowd

Edward S. Herman, *Triumph of the Market: Essays on Economics, Politics, and the Media* (Boston: South End Press)$16.00 276 pp.

Lincoln famously said, "You may fool all of the people some of the time; you can even fool some of the people all of the time; but you can't fool all of the people all of the time." He had it right, for *his* time; in our time it is clear that almost all of the people can be made fools of almost all of the time. "Hornswoggled," as Abe Lincoln might have put it.

Lincoln framed his thoughts in the years when Marx was still working on the first volume of *Capital.* Then it was neither as necessary nor as easy to fool people as it is in our century. Setting aside four million slaves, the U.S. population was composed mostly of reasonably independent and optimistic small farmers and a largely illiterate, immigrant, and newly-forming industrial working class which faced a newly-forming capitalist class of merchant/financiers, industrialists, and planters. They were doing very well with the status quo. The Civil War was brewing, of course, but that was a fight among those at the top, not between the upper classes and those who worked the factories, the mines, and the fields.

Therefore, although the United States was a political democracy for white men in the nineteenth century, "democracy" constituted little or no threat for developing industrial capitalism.

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But that began to change as industry developed in the United States and elsewhere.

In his important study of the management of public opinion, the Australian economist Alex Cary set the scene succinctly and well: "The 20th century has been characterized by three developments of great political importance: the growth of democracy, the growth of corporate power, and the growth of propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy."[1] Carey goes on to show how the threat to business rule grew as the right to vote was extended (in the United States, to women in 1920 and to southern Blacks in the 1960s) and unions developed and grew. And as after First World War, it may be added, high school education became required while college education became increasingly possible for those not rich.

When Leni Riefenstahl was commissioned to celebrate the Nazi conquest of Germany, she called her film *The Triumph of the Will.* In a distinctly uncelebratory mood, Ed Herman's *Triumph of the Market* shows how the means and ends of capitalist power have become the lenses through which the spheres of the economy, foreign policy, and all else are viewed. They are, of course, distorting lenses, designed to sell commodities, ideas, and politicians—to fool all of the people almost all of the time, including not least some of those who formulate the distortions.

Of the latter, by no means among the most powerful but surely among the most serviceable to the powerful, are those pinned down in Herman's Part One: the economists, the cheerleaders for today's "free-market" capitalism. They are but the latest to befoul what they call the "science" of economics. With rare exceptions, economics has from its beginnings served as "the handmaiden of inspired truth" for capitalism—a phrase Herman borrows from one of his (and my) professors at Berkeley in the late 1940s.[2]

The most "skillful" of the handmaidens have been awarded the Nobel Prize in economics. All of them, Herman points out, signed a petition in support of NAFTA when it was astute to do so and, as is the economists' custom, all managed to ignore the ugly realities assuring that the treaty would damage all three countries involved: Canada, the United States, and Mexico, the last, of course, most of all.

Equally telling is the total neglect of a truly excellent economist never awarded the Nobel prize: the late Joan Robinson, who, having made substantial and acknowledged contributions to mainstream microeconomics, Keynesian economics, Marxism, and development economics (and having written more than once for *Monthly Review*) has never been mentioned as a serious possibility.

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The following quote from one of her books on economic development shows why: "It is not easy to see how the Third World can mount the attack on mass poverty and unemployment while preserving private property in the means of production and respecting the rules of the free-market economy." (Herman, p. 54) Robinson's true prize was that she lived her working life in such a fashion as to place herself above the Nobel committee's consideration.[3]

Herman's essays on economics and economists would be invaluable at any time. They are expecially so today as the Right gains momentum. One could say, "Well, good for him, but he's just doing what any competent and decent economist should do." Quite apart from the fact that he does much more of it and does it so very well, when one turns to the other three parts of the book (1) Culture, Society, and Politics; (2) Foreign Policy; (3) The Media, it is evident that he has gone well beyond the scope of an economist and astoundingly far beyond any call of duty. If there were a Medal of Honor for intellectuals, he would deserve one, and it would be because he was what Paul Baran called "an intellectual radical."

It is in the above-mentioned three areas that Herman has co-authored many books (with Noam Chomsky, Frank Brodhead, Gerry O'Sullivan, William Preston, and Herb Schiller) as well as doing a couple on his own, beginning with his ongoing satirical "dictionary" and always-growing studies of "doublespeak," his studies of American atrocities in Vietnam, the "real" terrorism, and so on.

In the twenty-seven essays in this book there is so much that is surprising, shocking, and vital to know that it seems almost indecent to single out one or another of them. Well over half first appeared first in *Z* magazine, itself a good recommendation for reading *Z* regularly. Some appeared in *MR*, and the rest in other popular or professional journals.

Having just said that it would be improper to single out some of his observations in preference to others, I nonetheless do so: Chapters eleven through fourteen treat some of the dimensions of racism.

— In an echo of Rap Brown he observes that "racism is *more* American than apple pie."

— In a table showing "super-affirmative action" he documents the frequent appearance of Black rightists such as Thomas Sowell, Shelby Steele, and Walter Williams in major newspapers, and the zero coverage of Bell Hooks, Manning Marable, and Cornel West over a period of eleven years.

— In a discusion of what are scorned as "politically correct" (PC) holocausts, conspiracies, assassinations, and language, all ignored

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or rejected by our leaders as compared with what he calls "really correct" (RC) holocausts which are observed with disapproval by the establishment, if sometimes belatedly. Thus what *we* condemn, such as the tens of millions killed in the African slave trade, the massacres in East Timor, El Salvador, etc., are PC, and therefore to be dismissed as left-wing propaganda; and what *they* condemn, such as the Holocaust, is RC.

— In what I take again to be to be his own phrase when he is discussing the matter of reparations—"The clean slate starts now"– he expertly shows how those in power view the past as inconsequential when they are framing policies in the present. As Marx put the matter, "There was no history before; now there is history."

Part Four deals with the media and contains essays that serve to update the indispensable book he did with Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent.* Among the several essays, my favorite is a long one zeroing in on David Broder, a mainstream liberal who often serves on TV, on the op-ed pages, and as a columnist to "give the other side."

As Herman painstakingly shows, Broder is from the middle, at best. "Painstakingly" here means what it always means in Herman's writings: thorough research going at least as far as understanding requires. Here, let me list just the subheadings for that chapter on Broder (understanding that this essay is representative of all the essays in the book, and that the footnotes themselves constitute an education): No Agenda and No Pugnacity, Kindness Toward Conservatives, Lazy Insider, Elitism and Anti-Democracy, Politics Lite, Libya and Terrorism, Haiti and El Salvador. Reaganomics and the Deficit, Military Budget, NAFTA and Free Trade, Iran-Contra, Crime, Welfare and Family Values, Education, Environment, Broder on the Press, Forecasts, Concluding Note (which itself concludes with the observation "In sum, David Broder is an ideal 'Leftist' for a media and political establishment that can't even abide a serious liberal challenge."[4]

In these days of what amounts to an almost totalitarian assault against what is necessary and desirable in our society it becomes increasingly vital to be informed, and for all too many it is a matter of survival to be informed. But more than informed, it is vital to understand who rules the roost of information in the universities, in the media, in politics, in business.

On top of all else, Herman writes in the tradition of Ambrose Bierce, Thorstein Veblen, and George Orwell, with an ironic outlook and a wit that make his essays not only illuminating but pleasurable.

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NOTES

1. Alex Carey, *Managing Public Opinion: The Corporate Offensive* (Sidney: Unpublished ms., 1987), p. 1. I only just learned that this important work has been published: *Taking the Risk Out of Democracy* (Sidney: University of New South Wales Press, 1995). Carey's comparative study focuses on Australia and the United States. In terms of resistance to the "offensive," it comes out in favor of Australia.
2. Robert A. Brady, in his *The Spirit and Structure of German Fascism* (New York: Viking, 1937). The first and still the best book in English on the rise of the Nazis, this work may also be seen as one of the first to explore the role of "mind management" as perhaps "the" main means of facilitating destructive social change. Though himself an excellent economist, more than half of Brady's study is concerned with the "non-economic" measures of the Nazis, under the heading "The Coordination of the Spirit." A year after its publication Brady was ordered to appear before the House UnAmerican Activities Committee, which classified him as "prematurely anti-fascist." In some sense, that tells it all.
   Ed and I were part of a fairly large group of Second World War vets doing graduate work at the U.C. Department of Economics. In that period the Department was at its peak of excellence, not coincidentally because its faculty was at the peak of its diversity: of thirty or so members at least six could be classified as social critics, dissenters, or radicals, and another half dozen or so were reasonably sane and well informed about the economy. For the Ph.D. one had to study for and pass written and oral exams in economic history and the history of economic thought, an understanding of which made one very skeptical indeed concerning the matter of the other field required, economic theory. Nowadays all that one must "master" is one aspect or another of that mindless, heartless, foolish theory (plus math), whether in U.C. or elsewhere. In 1950 the regents (trustees) of the University imposed a "loyalty oath" (the first for a university), and from then on there was a steady erosion of diversity.
3. You might find it rewarding to read a fine book, *The Joan Robinson Legacy* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1991), Ingrid H. Rina, Editor, which includes among 18 other essays Marjorie S. Turner's "Joan Robinson: Why Not a Nobel Laureate?"
4. In the 1960s Noam Chomsky began to write one essay after another analyzing and criticizing U.S. foreign policy, rising to a crescendo as the Vietnam War proceeded. In that period Chomsky's essays were a staple of the *New York Review of Books* and were frequently featured in the David Levine cartoon on the cover. Chomsky did not stop writing in the 1970s, but you can look long and hard without finding a Chomsky article in the *NYRB* in the last twenty years, although he does on occasion get a letter in when someone has ill-advisedly attacked his work as a linguist. And have they ever explained why Paul Sweezy isn't good enough for their pages?

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CORRESPONDENCE

Response to Victor Wallis

by Ronald Aronson

Normally I do not respond to reviews, but since I respect *Monthly Review* so highly—indeed I have published in it—I must say a few words in reply to Victor Wallis's strange and uncomradely discussion of my book *After Marxism.* (*MR* January 1996) All those of us on the Left who have ever set pen to paper accept the possibility of hostile and uncomprehending readers: it goes with the territory when you attack the dominant ideological conventions and threaten long-established interests. But I find it striking to meet with this treatment in a journal of the Left. While Wallis's hostility and refusal to address what I've written trouble me, I am even more disturbed by his obvious contempt for the intelligence of *Monthly Review* readers and by the enormous disservice he is doing to Marxism. His dogmatic "defense" of Marxism only increases the possibility that the next Left will develop without the anti-capitalist direction he wants for it.

Wallis announces at the outset that my own "core arguments deserve to be met with specific counter-arguments." I agree. But although promised, these never appear. Instead, we find insinuation, invective, and angry rhetoric, without so much as a statement of my argument or a reply. This starts with the title of his review: "Socialism under Siege." By whom? By me? (In response I direct him to my article, "Socialism without Apologies" in the September 1995 issue of the *Democratic Left*, whose entire purpose is to reaffirm the importance of socialism as an alternative to capitalism.) And it appears in the way the review essay was set up: Aronson *versus* Miliband, the recreant versus the faithful one (without so much as mentioning my own tribute to Milband or my argument with him, developed at a decisive moment of the book).

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Don't *Monthly Review* readers deserve enough respect to be told what the author is arguing, what *he* thinks is new about the current situation, what are *his* conclusions and the reasons he gives for coming to them? Instead, I became the instance of a trend, a cipher really, no mind of my own, reflecting "prevailing winds." We hear that I align myself "unreservedly with postmodernist thinking" —totally false, considering that in large part the book was written against postmodernism, and clearly stated in an antipomo chapter entitled "Emancipating Modernity." *Monthly Review* readers are told that I don't explain why the case against Marxism is more damning today than thirty years ago when I became a Marxist—wholly false, since I trace in a chapter entitled "Why Now?" how Marxism has become a theory without a movement in the years since 1975. Then, in a flailing attack whose logic weakens as its rhetoric escalates, Wallis lashes at me for my "fawning self-righteousness" (indeed!); "arrogant ritual of self abasement," "apologizing for being an intellectual," "parochial polemics and slipshod reasoning," and "dangerous nonsense." So much for meeting my "core arguments with specific counter-arguments!"

What does *After Marxism* actually say? My premise is that Marxism needs to be understood as Marx understood it, as a project and not just as a theory. In this respect I argue that it is finished as the hegemonic project of social transformation; but that we nevertheless continue to live under capitalism, which is as exploitative as ever and even more destructive of our social, physical, and psychological space. But the time is past when workers represent the possibility of universal emancipation. If there is to be a next Left it will have to be anti-capitalist —but also feminist and anti-racist and green. It will, in other words, have to be a radical coalition; this means that the next Left will need to absorb a relativized and lower-case marxism as one component of a larger set of outlooks and orientations. Yes, anti-capitalist politics are just as relevant as ever, but in a larger movement that includes, but is not limited to, class politics.

Let me be clear: this argument begins from *within* the Marxist tradition. My key text is the second Thesis on Feuerbach:

> The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth, i.e. the reality and the power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question.

In doing so, our task is not defending the whole cloth of today's theoretical Marxism-without-a-movement, but to take what remains

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alive of it into a new movement, making it a vital component of a new political practice. How outlandish is my argument? Does Wallis still see the next Left as being an exclusively proletarian attack on capitalism, rather than a larger radical coalition attacking economic and social targets? Or does he see the working class as the hegemonic force in the next Left? To state my position clearly, and then to argue the issue openly would be, indeed, to provide the counter-argument my argument deserves. And it is the argument *Monthly Review* readers deserve to read in the pages of *Monthly Review*, because we all deserve to discuss these issues openly. After all, that is one of the most vital functions an independent socialist journal can perform in this time of troubles. I, for one, would be pleased to participate in just such a discussion in these pages. I think we can all learn from it.

Reply to Ronald Aronson

by Victor Wallis

The title Ronald Aronson chose for his book is *After Marxism*. The statements "It is over" and "We are on our own" recur like incantations at key points in his argument. The message is clear: if we want to move forward in the name of social justice (or radical democracy or the defense of any or all oppressed groups), then Marxism must be laid to rest.

My response to this position was developed in the review-essay as a whole, and not just in the part that focused on Aronson. What Aronson's letter suggests to me, however, is that he may not have thought through all the implications of what he said in his book.

The historical setting for Aronson's attempted burial of Marxism is one in which the socialist project has already suffered an unprecedented onslaught. There is a worldwide stampede toward privatization, affecting not only the former Communist bloc but also most welfare-states. Progressive forces, including the various social movements that Aronson accuses Marxism of slighting, are seriously divided and in most places are on the defensive.

Marxism is not just one object of this assault; it is the core target, the implicit unifying principle of all movements that reject—whether consciously or not—a market-based or hierarchical definition of human priorities.

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In the present situation, with the historic gains of the left indeed "under siege," a funeral sermon for Marxism, no matter how respectful and at times sympathetic it might be, has the practical effect of contributing to a self-fulfilling capitalist prophecy. After all, who can more authoritatively sign the death-certificate than a former "self-professed Marxist"?

In his letter, Aronson appears not to want to take responsibility for such applications. Thus, he now says that the left's discussion must begin "from *within* the Marxist tradition." If he really meant this, however, he would need to begin by disavowing his book's title and central thesis.

On page ninety of his book, Aronson cites "the spirit of postmodernism" as guiding his treatment of Marxism. The fact that he does not reject all manifestations of "modernity" is beside the point. What he does assert is his rejection of universalism. His text does not lack eloquent calls to solidarity, but in his practical discussion, his endorsement of the "separateness and plurality" of the various social movements is counterposed against what he calls "the assumption that they are oppressed in the same ways or by the same structures" (p. 186). Implicit in this formulation is Aronson's own assumption that because the oppressions are diverse, the corresponding "structures" can have no underlying coherence.

His present summary of what he "actually" said only confirms this reading. He speaks of plural identities, overlooking the process involved in binding them together into an effective political force.

There is no dispute between us about the need to go beyond a narrowly class-oriented politics; Miliband is equally emphatic on this point. Where there is a problem is in an approach to "non-class" (or, more accurately, *cross*-class) issues which fails to recognize that they can each be addressed—even by progressives—in a number of different ways, not all of which are equally effective.

To embrace Marxism is not to deny or diminish the importance of environmentalism, feminism, or anti-racism. Rather, it is to place the corresponding negative or oppressive behaviors in their larger historical context, and to see how these have become bound up—in whatever complex ways—not only with each other but also, more fundamentally, with the priorities of capital.

Why is such such a larger view needed? Historically, despite the unevenness of popular advances on different fronts, it has been generally true that the biggest gains in any particular sector have come when many sectors were pushing at once. The ruling class always seeks ways to divide such efforts. To take a current example, if the battle over affirmative action can be pigeonholed as either a

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race issue or a gender issue or, more generally, defined as a matter of individual advancement in a competitive setting, then the larger pattern of inequalities *in every dimension* will only be reinforced.[1]

Whatever might be Aronson's views about particular postmodernist thinkers, his concrete discussion of left practice—both in his book and in his "response"—fully exemplifies the postmodernist approach. It disaggregates all the various popular struggles. It thinks at most in terms of coalitions among them. It does not recognize, or seek to understand, or imagine resisting, any common structure of control. It has no room for any but the most narrow and economistic conception of the working class. It encourages an uncritical approach to the immediate expression of each and every particular "identity," refusing to acknowledge that every human being has the capacity to go beyond this.

In the name of being up-to-date, Aronson tries to return us to an attitude we have long sought to overcome: worship of the existing fact. Thus, if universalism is engaged in predominantly—as Aronson sees it—by white heterosexual male intellectuals, then this must be what defines it. Similarly, if most people say that the end of one phase of socialist history means the death of Marxism, then the very weight of opinion must make it so.

Of course Marxism is, as Aronson insists, more than just a theory. But its soundness as a project cannot be measured by the number of its advocates at any one moment. Far more important is its inherent potential for unifying diverse struggles around a common goal.

The setbacks Marxism has suffered do not render suddenly irrelevant its understanding of the full scope and complexity of capitalism. Nor do they mean that coalitions of progressive forces have now suddenly acquired the capacity to succeed where parties with a comprehensive agenda failed.

The defeats certainly call for critical analysis; but if such analysis is to be fruitful, it must be rooted in practical efforts to overcome the fragmentation of progressive constituencies. This requires a willingness to challenge, rather than accepting at face value, the articulation of constituency interests in the language of identity politics.

The affirmation of one's identity or uniqueness constitutes, in political terms, a stage of development. It must be respected as such, but it should not be allowed to supersede awareness of one's commonality—in terms of basic needs and interests—with the vast majority of the human race.[2]

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It is true that the idea of commonality is often invoked by those who would prefer to ignore racial and other forms of oppression. But this is a deceptive and misleading use of the term. A true sense of commonality actually heightens our awareness of such wrongs, for it enables each of us to imagine ourselves in the position of whoever might be the victim. In political terms, we are then better prepared to understand what we must resist in common. This is what the postmodern approach, expressed by Aronson in his exaggerated emphasis on "difference," fails to see.

NOTES

1. See Kate Kinkade, Laura Pulido, and Rita Burgos, "The Urgency and Limits of Affirmative Action," *AhoraNow* (Labor/Community Strategy Center, Los Angeles), n. 2 (Spring, 1996), p. 8.
2. See Eric Hobsbawm's excellent discussion of what he calls "the denial of multiple identity," in his essay, "Identity Politics and the Left," *New Left Review*, n. 217 (May/June, 1996).

Note To Our Readers:

In the June 1996 issue, page 56, the review of James Loewen's book *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, by Alexander Saxton, contained a series of inexcusable copy editing errors, the most serious of which can be found in the opening paragraph. The last sentence of that paragraph should have read: "It reached eventually to working people considered as a social class, and to women."

As it appeared in the June issue the ultimate sentence read "The effort resulted in defining workers and women as social classes." This idiotic error is deeply regretted by us.

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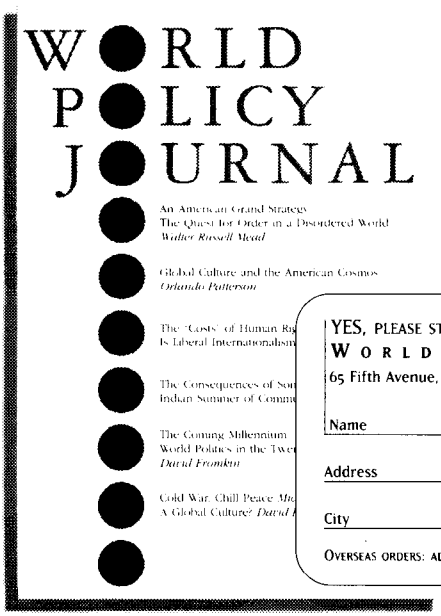

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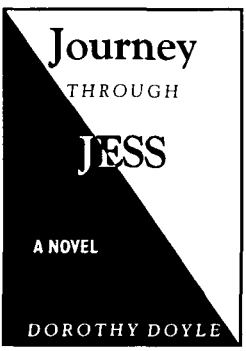

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Continued from inside front cover

In normal times the basic structure of capitalism—economic, social, legal—is such that the preponderance of power rests with capital. But preponderance is an elastic concept. There are times, like the present, when it means a vast and palpable superiority. There are other times when the gap narrows, and still others (called revolutions) when the preponderance changes sides.

The great depression, the war, and the end of the war set the stage for far-reaching changes, including attempted and successful revolutions in some parts of the world. Even in the core capitalist countries that were on the winning side in the war, a marked shift in the balance of power in favor of labor took place. Waging all-out war requires sacrifices from all elements of the population, but the brunt of course falls on the more numerous lower classes that do most of the fighting and dying. Capitalist regimes find it necessary to make concessions to the opposition, some while the war is still in process, and more in the form of glowing promises for the future. The intention of course is to renege on as many of these promises as possible when the time comes, but in these situations the shift in the balance of power is usually real, and its effects are likely to last for months or even years before things return to normal.

Shifts in the balance of power between capital and labor took place in all the belligerent countries, nowhere more dramatically than in Britain where the war-time rationing system enabled the British population, particularly the poorest and hitherto undernourished parts, to enjoy a greatly improved diet, with remarkable consequences for the nation's health and well-being. With respect to the promises for the future Britons also fared relatively well, not because of any changes in heart of capital's leaders, but rather because a general election held shortly after the end of the war resulted in a smashing victory for labor. This and comparable developments in other capitalist countries strengthened the shift in relative power already under way and established the basis for Hobsbawm's golden decades of cohabitation between capitalism and social democracy.

While this shift in power relations played a crucial role in determining the character of the immediate postwar decades, it was by no means the only factor at work. The urgent need for rebuilding and restocking set the stage for an economic upsurge which was soon reinforced by the outbreak of wars in Korea and Vietnam and by a generalized arms buildup foreshadowing the coming Cold War. The overall situation in the immediate postwar period was thus approximately as follows: labor had somewhat improved its position vis-a-vis capital, while capital for its part was enjoying boom conditions, with profits rolling in and capital accumulation proceeding apace. In these circumstances, not surprisingly, labor felt emboldened to press its demands, often with considerable success since capital was clearly in a position to make concessions and in no mood to pay the price for what might turn into very costly labor struggles. This is the reality behind what Hobsbawm calls cohabitation between regulated capitalism and social democracy.

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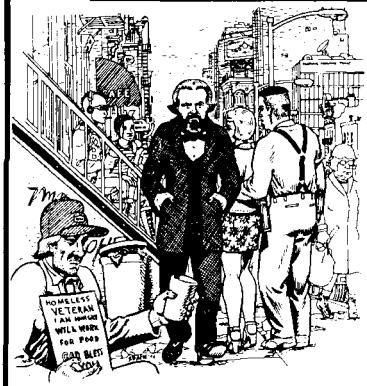
HOW TO READ KARL MARX



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